

# FRIEZE

#### **The Whitney Biennial's Quietude Shouldn't Be Overlooked** Terence Trouillot

The 2024 edition faces the challenges of past iterations while overcoming their many pitfalls with an impressive and beautiful showcase.

With this year's Whitney Biennial already having been dismissed by many critics (*New Yorker, New York Times, Vulture*) as riskless, I felt hard-pressed to agree. It's an accusation that – for an exhibition which, historically, has been the target of tremendous rebuke and, in recent years, mired by unwelcome, and seemingly never-ending, controversy – feels somewhat pedantic, even tiresome. Yet, criticism with a capital 'C' appears to rear its ugly (albeit discerning) head with greater zeal at the Whitney Biennial – the longest-running exhibition dedicated to art in the US – than at any other large-scale exhibition on the North American art calendar. While many may disagree with this observation, to me the scale and severity of the biennial's media coverage feels disproportionate – especially when considering how much of what is written today falls under the rubric of 'art writing' (arguably a euphemism for 'moderate' art criticism).

Ultimately, much as I did in 2019 – another biennial deemed soft by critics (*The Art Newspaper, Artsy, Guardian*) – I feel inclined to defend this year's exhibition, 'Even Better Than the Real Thing', amid the opprobrium it's provoked. Co-curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli have transformed the Renzo Piano-designed, glitzy corporate fortress that has been home to the Whitney since 2017 into an environment that prioritizes carefully crafted exhibition design. The result is not always successful, but it's a far cry from the previous biennial's chock-a-block arrangement of works. This year's expertly curated edition avoids these all-too-common pitfalls to showcase a tremendous array of impressive and, yes, beautiful art.

Among them is a smattering of sculptures that deal directly with the body and the way language 'is being used politically [...] to restrict bodily autonomy', according to the curatorial statement. Julia Phillips's hauntingly beguiling ceramic casts of torsos (Nourisher, 2022, and Mediator, 2020), alongside a selection from her series 'Conception Drawings' (2020-21), together muse on the aesthetics and conditions of motherhood and pregnancy. Jes Fan's undulating and cavernous 3D-printed CAT scans of his body (e.g. Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle III), 2023) and B. Ingrid Olson's installation including concave forms suggestive of body parts (Proto Coda, Index, 2016-22) are both stunning and politically poignant, alluding to the precarity and invisibility of certain bodies promulgated by ableism and bigotry.



Jes Fan, Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle II), 2023. Courtesy: the artist and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photograph: Audrey Wang

Another strength of the biennial is its focus on video art – a medium all-too-frequently sidelined in recent years – with a number of breathtaking works, including Isaac Julien's five-channel opus Once Again ... (*Statues Never Die*) (2022) on the life of philosopher and educator Alain Locke; Ligia Lewis's gritty dance film about Europe's cultural imperialism in Latin America (*A Plot, A Scandal,* 2023); and Diane Severin Nguyen's In Her Time (*Iris's Version*) (2023–24), in which she follows an actress as she rehearses her role in a film about the Nanjing Massacre of 1937. I was most impressed by Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich's *Too Bright to See* (2023–24), a lyrical film honouring the life and work of feminist thinker Suzanne Roussi-Césaire, whose writings proved integral to the Négritude movement in Martinique. The work explores the complex relationship between the erasure of Black women in history and the privileging of artistic anonymity. As actress Zita Hanrot, who plays Roussi-Césaire, states: 'We are making a film about an artist who did not want to be remembered.'

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This is not to say that the show is entirely without its shortcomings. Dora Budor's shaky video of New York's Hudson Yards (Lifelike, 2024), revealing the dizzying effects of urban renewal and unchecked capitalism, was a little too on-the-nose for my taste, while Suzanne Jackson's latest paintings of detritus frozen in acrylic gel (e.g., Palimpsest Grit, 2022–23), although commendable for their bold experimentation, did not feel entirely realized. Moreover, despite the accompanying literature purporting that the show investigates how artists are probing the realities of artificial intelligence, Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst's xhairymutantx (2024) is the only firm example. The work is a text-to-image AI model trained to produce only strange versions of Herndon's own image (a white female with red hair in a camo bodysuit), regardless of the prompts it is given. In addition to the two glossy prints on display (*xhairymutantx Embedding Study 2*, 2024), thousands more images are available to view online on the Whitney Museum's Artport site, where anyone is encouraged to use the model. I typed in 'James Baldwin eating a sandwich' and it spat out an amusing illustration of the famed author in a camo blazer sporting a short, auburn bob. Yet, xhairymutantx's attempts to complicate our understanding of self-determination and body autonomy within the digital realm merely scratch at the surface. It's an interesting work that leaves you wanting more. I can only hope that the exhibition's scheduled film and performance programme will delve deeper into the relationship between AI, our bodies and our sense of reality.

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Where the exhibition does deliver on its promise, however, is in confronting the horrid legacies of transphobia and abuse towards marginalized groups by leveraging the works of queer and trans artist. In fact, each floor of the exhibition is centred around a work by a trans artist. On the sixth floor, for instance, P. Staff's Afferent Nerves (2023) – a neon yellow-lit room with a live electrical net hanging above – immediately greets you as you step out of the elevator. The same is true of Tourmaline's filmic ode to Marsha P. Johnson on the fifth floor (*Pollinator*, 2022) and on the third floor Pippa Garner's installation of notes and drawings in part detailing her transition (*Inventor's Office*, 2021–24). Occupying the first-floor gallery, Ser Serpas's installation, *taken through back entrances* ... (2024), comprises discarded materials she scavenged in Bushwick, New York. While not all these works need to be read through a trans lens, they offer up a space for these artists quietly to exercise their right to be seen on their own terms.

'Even Better Than the Real Thing', it's true, may not always present the most challenging works, especially for like-minded progressives who look to artists to shout from the rafters rather than carefully consider the issues that plague them. The problem that the Whitney Biennial now faces is that, instead of acting as a mandate for the 'best' in American contemporary art, it has become a mirror for the country's political climate that looks to present an accurate picture of the times we live in through the responses of artists. Yet, the role of soothsayer should surely fall neither to artist nor curator. That said, this year's biennial does seem to capture the precarity of the world we live in today. A not-so-subtle example of this is *we must stop imaging apocalypse/genocide + we must imagine liberation* (2024), a text-based neon work by poet and artist Demian DinéYazhi'. The sentences presented are inspired by Indigenous resistance movements and offer another message in disguise: flashing letters spelling out the phrase 'Free Palestine'. Although the work was made prior to the current war in Gaza, the piece speaks silently to recent reprimands against artistic expression in the wake of the conflict.

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This show, for me, feels like a quiet rumination on the subject of privilege – specifically on who is allowed to hold space to share their ideas safely, irrespective of their political beliefs. Considering the insidious brand of McCarthyism that seems to plague cultural institutions all across the world at the moment, playing it relatively safe may be the only option for survival. A quiet resilience amid the chaos, strife and injustice that surrounds us. As Roussi-Césaire proclaims in *Too Bright to See*: 'When the storm comes, sugar cane bends.'

'Whitney Biennial 2024: Even Better Than the Real Thing' is on view at the Whitney Whitney Museum of American Art until 11 August.

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# ArtReview

#### Whitney Biennial 2024 Review: Baby Steps

Jenny Wu

The 81st edition, Even Better Than the Real Thing, reflects the biennial's own function as a time capsule – what do we want to say about our present reality?

Given that the 81st edition of the biennial shares a title with a U2 track with jaunty lyrics that go, 'You're the real thing / Even better than the real thing', you might approach the visual and sound- and timebased works by its 71 total participants – 29 of whom are included in concurrent film and performance programmes - expecting to encounter a barrage of libidinal intensities. Described in its curatorial statement as a 'dissonant chorus' inaugurating a future characterised by bodies existing and shapeshifting freely in physical and virtual space, the 2024 biennial seems poised to inherit the formal concerns of its previous iteration, which featured memorable born-digital and posthuman works by Jacky Connolly, Aria Dean, Daniel Joseph Martinez and WangShui.

At first sight, this year's four-floor presentation, with its minimalist restraint and intimate closed floorplan, suggests more harmony than dissonance. Evidence of a struggle between dominant, reactionary interpretations of reality and the lived realities of marginalised groups takes time to emerge. When it does, however, we see the reality of the latter linked to the notion of historical truth. Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich's film Too Bright to See (2023-24) pays tribute to the overlooked Martinican theorist Suzanne Roussi Césaire (1915–66). Long takes shot in Miami, in which an actress portraying the thinker stands solemnly among palm trees, reading occasionally from her essays, conjure Roussi Césaire's Martinique no more than the landscape of

her time did: "This beautiful, lush island", a line from the film reveals, "camouflages the colonial reality". As a corrective to archival biases favouring those in power, viewers are urged to seek out the narratives of women and colonial subjects buried beneath the visual harmonies of natural vistas.

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In Diane Severin Nguyen's film In Her Time (Iris's Version) (2023-24), an actress playing an actress in a recreation of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre reflects, "Some roles are far away from my real life. I do a lot of research... I try to recall the films I've seen and then I really put myself into them." Perhaps the past exists only as images, but an empathetically researched reenactment can help recover real emotions. Likewise, in Pollinator (2022), a video about the Black trans activist Marsha P. Johnson (1945–92), the artist Tourmaline strolls in early-twentieth-century attire through cultural institutions in Brooklyn; in A Plot, A Scandal (2023), artist Ligia Lewis dances with spears, parodying racist tropes, then romps around in a period costume on a verdant hill in Italy. These three works reanimate history's spectres to show how, as Tourmaline asserts in her artist statement, 'The truth of life is its ongoingness', or, to quote Lewis's film, "Ghosts don't die so easily".

Considering the biennial's own function as a time capsule, the curators seem to have asked, 'What do we want future historians to know about our present reality?' Accordingly, many of the works on view index the human body's vast indeterminacy, which we've come to recognise via technology and introspection. Jes Fan's biomorphic sculptures – 3D-printed CAT scans of his leg mus-



Jes Fan, Contrapposto, 2023; Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle II), 2023; Jes Fan, Gut, 2023; installation views. Photo: Audrey Wang. Courtesy the artist and Whitney Biennial

cles, spine and stomach – function elegantly as metonymised self-portraits. P. Staff's portrait takes the form of a wallpaper on which their countenance is at once expanded, dispersed and obscured. Using ceramic body-casts threaded with PVC tubes, Julia Phillips posits parental care as the extension of one body into another, while the invisible hands activating Nikita Gale's player piano suggest that, through labour, bodies extend far beyond the flesh.

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For the future historian, the biennial also registers several of today's most urgent political debates. A neon sign by Demian DinéYazhi' spells out a message to 'pursue + predict + imagine routes toward liberation' while flickering the phrase 'Free Palestine', echoing the demand of activists who have, in recent months, gathered in the streets of New York and institutions like MoMA and the Brooklyn Museum to call out acts of whitewashing and name those with financial ties to the Israeli arms industry. Elsewhere, 2,500 snapshots depicting tasks associated with abortion care, which Carmen Winant collected from archives and clinics across the American Midwest and

South, commemorate half a century of legal and ideological struggles for reproductive rights. One sees as well in the strips of photographic film Lotus L. Kang deliberately exposed under 'wrong' levels of light and humidity, which hang in a captivating fifth-floorinstallation, and in the expanse of 'soiled' junk and paint-spattered tarp that constitutes Ser Serpas's work in the Whitney's lobby, the unremitting desire to defy aesthetic norms, a necessary first step, the exhibition suggests, towards envisioning a 'better', liberated reality.

Whitney Biennial 2024: Even Better Than the Real Thing, *Whitney Museum of American Art, New York*, through 11 August Jason Farago, Travis Diehl and Martha Schwendener, "Dozens of Artists, 3 Critics: Who's Afraid of the Whitney Biennial 2024?", New York Times, 14 March 2024

## **Ehe New York Eimes**



Lotus L. Kang, "In Cascades," 2023-24. Long, broad sheets of exposed film, still light-sensitive, will evolve over the run of the Whitney Biennial, thanks to the glare and humidity of the museum. Credit: Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

The Whitney Biennial, New York's most prominent showcase of new American (or American-ish) art, thrives on argument: in print, in comment threads, in barrooms and sometimes in the galleries themselves. Its 81st edition opens Thursday to museum members and to the public on March 20, and it introduces a "dissonant chorus" — in the phrase of Ligia Lewis, a participating artist and choreographer — of young talents and veteran practitioners. We sent a dissonant chorus of our own to the Whitney Museum of American Art: three critics, each writing separately, on the highs and lows of the exhibition everyone will have an opinion about.

#### It Could Be Weirder Than the Real Thing Martha Schwendener

When the artists and collectives selected for the Whitney Biennial were announced in January, next to most of the artists' names, in parentheses, were gender pronouns. I started reading the list — and immediately got distracted. (Remember when it was the medium that was paraded: "sculptor," "painter," "performance artist"?) This, of course, is among the most fraught topics of the moment. In a stroke of perfect cosmic fate, Judith Butler's new book, "Who's Afraid of Gender?," which details authoritarian responses to current gender debates around the globe, even drops the day before the biennial opens to the public.

I was prepared, then, for a biennial in which identity was showcased, and the curators have indeed set out to celebrate the work of Black, L.G.B.T.Q., Indigenous, disabled, marginalized and overlooked artists. The results are mixed. But first, the art.

The best works here, for me, are film and video, followed by sculpture and trailed significantly by painting. Some of the standouts in the video category are Tourmaline's six-minute elegiac and playful meditation memorializing the transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson. You step off the fifth-floor elevator and the first thing you see is an arch leading to Tourmaline's video. Sculpture here tends toward monumentality and is often relegated to the outskirts of the exhibition. Some of the best works include Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio's block of shifting, prefossilized amber, embedded with plants and even typewritten documents, suggesting both natural and cultural elements in an unstable state. Torkwase Dyson has taken over an outside terrace on the fifth floor with two arching black behemoths you can climb and sit on. Dyson has been working in a late-minimalist vein for a couple of decades, and her ideas of Blackness and abstraction in physical spaces, including the vast city stretching out before you on the terrace, resonate through this work.

On a smaller scale, Jes Fan's upright sculpture remakes Isamu Noguchi's modern biomorphism — using fiberglass and CT scans of his own body. Holes are also burrowed for viewers to peek into the gallery wall, suggesting art as a living organism and providing a weird element in an exhibition that is largely lacking in weirdness. Meanwhile, Rose B. Simpson's totemic figures made with ceramics and even animal hides hark back to Pueblo pottery and matrilineal Indigenous culture.

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Don't get me wrong: This is a well-researched, well-intentioned, beautifully installed, if sedate, edition of the biennial. We all need a rest in this moment of upheaval and change, when being a person can feel as complex as creating an artwork. But as the trans activist and legal adviser Stephen Whittle has pointed out, we're moving "into a new world in which any identity can be imagined, performed, and named." The next step, of course, is a world in which no demarcating "identities" are needed at all.

## THE NEW YORKER

#### The Whitney Biennial's Taste for Flesh Jackson Arn

If every label in "Even Better Than the Real Thing," the eighty-first installment of the Whitney Biennial, were peeled off the walls and tossed into the Hudson, what would happen?

Some sections would get more confusing, of course. When you walked through the yellow-lit gallery on the museum's sixth floor, you probably wouldn't suppose that the faint buzz came from a live electrical net floating overhead, let alone that the light, the buzz, and the net might represent "the tension between dissociation and hypervigilance," according to the piece's artist, P. Staff. Passing the cluster of translucent medicine cabinets, you wouldn't know that the buttery stuff inside was Vaseline, and, even if you guessed right, you would still be ignorant of the fact that the artist, Carolyn Lazard, went with Vaseline because it is "both a lubricant and an occlusive ointment," and thus connected to their interest in "the entanglement between illness and capitalism."

But, in other ways, a label-less Biennial might be clearer. The introductory text, by the co-curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli, stresses the point that "Artificial Intelligence is complicating our understanding of what is real." One of the first art works you see on the sixth floor is, sure enough, an A.I.-generated print, courtesy of Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, so it's a letdown to continue through the galleries and find approximately zero other pieces dealing with artificial intelligence. A show purged of wall text wouldn't tease you like that, at least. You would also have an easier time recognizing how many of these works depend on text not just for background but for aesthetics:



"Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle II)," one of Jes Fan's works on display. Art work by Jes Fan / Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery / Empty Gallery

whatever beauty or humor they've got comes from nearby words, as the glow of the moon comes from the glare of the sun.

Is this worth getting grumpy about? You can always scold the Whitney Biennial, the longest-running survey of American art, for not being better-but, then, you can always scold winter for being cold and gray. Some inevitable combination of bureaucracy, human fallibility, and mathematical law keeps things bland: each time, the curators settle on sixty or a hundred or, this year, seventy-one artists whose creations have some relevance to the state of society, as well as to the state of art. Doing that job and not ending up with yawny work would be like rolling double sixes seventy-one times in a row. This year, as ever, eclecticism is mistaken for richness: "Even Better Than the Real Thing" makes a well-publicized push for geographic diversity, but its most important lesson might be that twentyfirst-century art can come from anywhere and still speak in the same jet-lagged

monotone. More than a quarter of the artists on display, by the way, went to one of three schools.

Assuming that a sample like this can be taken seriously, the most exciting subject for contemporary American artists isn't artificial intelligence; it's the good old human body. Striking and bland art works alike have a fleshy funk. Jes Fan converts CT scans of his body into dun fibreglass sculptures. In Julia Phillips's ceramic sculptures, the casts hint at a phantom chest and face; a gallery over, Carmen Winant, mooching off the pathos of the abortion clinic, combines hundreds of photographs of physicians and volunteers into a giant rectangle. Better than all three is Pippa Garner, who, in her eighties, has been entrusted with the museum's third floor and earns her keep with drawings, reprised here as photocopies, of useless body-augmenting gadgets: a phone holder that allows you to text with your tongue, a "multi-pen" for signing checks, a remote-control toilet flusher. Spend enough time snorting at these and the body itself starts to seem like another clumsy gadgettongue-texting may be ridiculous, but so is a tongue. Nothing in these nervous scribbles feels final; Garner, like nature, is always just spitballing. Which means that what is earnest and thoughtful about her drawings, many of them produced during her gender transition, is inseparable from what's funny. Good artists, like good comedians, do just fine without the safety net of explication.

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By a close margin, the four fabric assemblages of Harmony Hammond are the fleshiest things in this show. They use a variety of materials to suggest a whole menagerie of bodies, from pimply-shiny to aged and chalky. Colors are subdued for the most part, and strategically so: when a touch of red shrieks out of the dirty white field of "Chenille #11," it almost hurts. Hammond has suggested that flourishes like this were meant to evoke "sexual brutality against women," but take a few steps back and marvel at how this only deepens her work's mystery-if the red is brutality, what are the string, the smeared white, the grommets? Interpretation is interwoven with the sheer, thingy strangeness of the object, and can't be ripped out. Art like that is built to last, I would guess. But if you prefer your political messaging neat, no chaser, you are welcome to walk to the other end of the sixth floor, go to the terrace, and spend some quality time with Kiyan Williams's big dirt sculpture of the White House sinking into the ground, complete with upside-down American flag. There's a label in case you can't figure out what it means.

### The Washington Post



Jes Fan's "Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle III)." (Olympia Shannon/Empty Gallery, Hong Kong; and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York)

#### A superb Whitney Biennial, marred by flimsy politics Sebastian Smee

In terms of persuasive art by grown-up artists, this year's Whitney Biennial — the 81st iteration of this closely watched survey of contemporary art — may be the best in more than a decade. But that, frankly, is a low bar. Compared with previous editions, this show groans with good work. But it is also — true to form — about 50 percent dross.

I admired, too, the sculptures of Jes Fan, which are made from 3D-printed CT scans of the artist's knee, hip muscles and vertebrae. He combines these organic-looking forms with blobs of clear, handblown glass. Fan evokes the body by displacing it. B. Ingrid Olson and K.R.M. Mooney do something similar, Olson with immaculately crafted forms that are like containers for body parts, Mooney with fascinating wall sculptures made from steel electroplated with silver. Since steel and silver react to one another, the work's colors and textures change over time, like skin exposed to sun.

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A lot of the rest of the show, as I said, is flimsily political. Iles and Onli hope their biennial will help us "come together even in a fractured time." But their vision of "us" doesn't stretch very far. The issue is not just the show's predictable, preaching-to-the-converted politics. It's that Iles and Onli want their exhibition to tap into "strategies of coping and healing." This kind of therapeutic cant, which has lately taken hold in the art world, sounds benign. But it collides with the uncomfortable reality that many strands of social idealism have hardened into sticks with which to beat the "unreconstructed."

If you think, as I do, that scolding, identity-based "activism" feeds a reactionary impulse toward populist authoritarianism (a dynamic epitomized by the changing usage of the term "woke" over the past decade), you might be less inclined to humor this Whitney Biennial.

Emily Watlington, "A Whitney Biennial with No Heroes and No Villains", Art in America, 26 March 2024

### Art in America

#### A Whitney Biennial with No Heroes and No Villains Emily Watlington

Can you tell an interesting story with no heroes and no villains? The 2024 Whitney Biennial, "Even Better Than the Real Thing," sure tries. In this edition, you won't find the bold assertions, the grand gestures, the finger pointing in short, the controversy—that typically make Biennial headlines. The works of the 71 artists on view here invite empathy and contemplation more than anger or applause.

This year's edition is brimming with fragile materiality: soft materials are at odds with firm frames. Dala Nasser drapes fabric, dyed with iron-rich clay from the banks of the Abraham River, over a wooden armature. Suzanne Jackson dangles delicate sheets of acrylic paint from rods. Lotus L. Kang hangs unfixed filmfrom an aluminum apparatus; the sheets take in light slowly over the show's duration. Jes Fan droops molten glass over an intricate lattice, where it hardens into blobs. And Carolyn Lazard fills a neo-Minimalist menagerie of mirrored medicine cabinets with Vaseline.

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What explains this trend? The answer seems obvious: today more than ever, fleshy realities are at odds with the strictures of daily life. This fact is made overt in an installation by Carmen Winant titled The Last Safe Abortion (2023), a grid of photographs documenting daily tasks of laborers in abortion clinics in the Midwest. The photographs, many shot when Roe was still the victor over Wade, now feel like a tragic time capsule. Bodily inhospitality is made explicit too, in Demian DinéYazhi's neon sign that reads "we must stop imagining destruction ... displacement + surveillance + genocide!" and so on. And two works—by Tourmaline and Kiyan Williams—commemorate Marsha P. Johnson (1945– 92), an activist who spoke out against assaults on Black and trans bodies.



Jes Fan: Contrapposto, 2023. PHOTO OLYMPIA SHANNON. ©JES FAN. COURTESY THE ARTIST; M+ MUSEUM, HONG KONG; EMPTY GALLERY, HONG KONG; AND ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK.

But complaining about wall labels goes only so far: good narration makes a difference, and yet, words will always fail when it comes to describing artworks speaking a more material language. What's more, the show's main theme—that friction between corporeal experience and oppressive norms—is, in the most literal sense, a material problem. Constantina Zavitsanos's All the Time (2019/24) shows why, at the subatomic level. In a soundtrack, the artist waxes poetic about quantum physics, explaining how our understanding of the material universe is all wrong. We often think about the material world as a zero-sum game: there are limited resources for which we must compete. But some things double when you divide them, like holograms, alongside which this work was initially shown. Let that sink in: if you cut a hologram in half, you don't get half an image, you get two. "Love is holographic," the track continues, the more you give away, the more you have.

Zavitsanos's artwork itself, if you pay close attention, is loving toward its viewers in a material way too. The impetus for the project was the artist's wanting to make a video that was accessible to their disabled community, for in disability as in holograms, "lack" is often actually a gain. There's no image, and the bass tops 100 hertz, making the sound haptic and vibrational. The words are transcribed via closed captioning, and all this is accessed via one giant ramp. If you are sighted and hearing and ambulatory—or if you never really have to think about access—you might miss all that. If that work isn't speaking directly to you, you'll have to slow down in order to let it sink in.



#### A Blazing, Brilliant Whitney Biennial Heralds a New Kind of Body Art Alex Greenberger

If the Whitney Biennial really must reflect the United States as it stands right now, this year it had a particularly tall order.

The show had to deal with growing discontent surrounding war abroad, particularly in Gaza, and it also had to portray mounting anger at home, where conservative-led legislatures and the pandemic have threatened the lives of many Americans. And that's not to mention that the country is at a crucial inflection point, with a presidential election coming in November.

But rather than taking up any of that, curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli have veered in a different direction. Their exhibition, which opens to the public on March 20, is light on loud, explicit political statements and heavy on conceptual art about bodies in flux. It's the most challenging Whitney Biennial in several editions, and also the best since 2017.

Iles and Onli's show, titled "Even Better Than the Real Thing," marks a turn away from the opulence of the past couple Whitney Biennials, which privileged lush art, sometimes to a fault. A number of works here even revisit Minimalism, a movement that rejected visual pleasure in favor of flinty industrial forms arranged neatly into rows and grids.

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Many works in this biennial are clean, largely

colorless, and slick. There are Jes Fan's elegant sculptures, for which his spine, leg muscles, and innards were CAT scanned and 3D-printed, with the latter being embedded in the wall and barely visible; these abstracted parts are supplemented with oozy-looking glass elements draped across them. There are Harmony Hammond's cryptic paintings, which are formed from reused fabrics that suggest bandages concealing mostly healed wounds. Peek around these white strips, and you may even spot a glimpse of blazing red paint.

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I preferred the tattered, knotted American flag that appears in a Ser Serpas installation on the ground floor that is filled with garbage. The flag rests here on a disused piece of a sectional relegated to the corner—which is perhaps where the Stars and Stripes belongs during these depressing times. Nearby, there are barbells, a fire hydrant tipped on its side, half a broken mirror, and an exercise ball trapped in a tent armature.

The Serpas installation, with all its tossedoff matter, looks a bit like the aftermath of a night of debauchery. In the context of this biennial, it also functions like an elegy for a celebratory moment post-lockdown when a state of normalcy had somewhat returned. It has finally come to an end. The party's over, but it sure was fun while it lasted.

# CULTURED

#### Jes Fan, Creator of Haunting Sculptures, Manipulates Materials on a Molecular Level

Working with materials from industrial materials to oysters and soybeans, Fan's multidisciplinary art—set to go on view at Andrew Kreps next fall—is omnivorous.

#### Tiana Reid

"The tears that you cry when you're sad, when you're happy, or when you're yawning are actually different molecular compositions," Jes Fan explains over Zoom. "Thinking about things at the molecular level excites me." These are recurrent themes in the Hong Kong- and Brooklyn-based artist's work: smallness, intellectual engagement, and the biological code that underpins and defines our turbulent emotional lives.

Fan was born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong before moving to New York in 2014 to study. In his almost 10 years in the city, the artist has developed a practice that harnesses installation, sculpture, and video to design, test, and even farm substances including oysters and plants.

Whatever the focus, Fan's work of late has emphasized exploration, process, and continuity. Currently, the artist—who graduated with a BFA in glass from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2014—is at work on the third chapter of an ongoing series called "Sites of Wounding," which began in 2020.

The first chapter, which he presented at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery earlier this year, took a local oyster species as its launch point, and included video works



Jes Fan, photographed by Allison Lippy.



Jes Fan, "Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1" (Installation View), 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

and large glass-embalmed shells, evoking the museumification of nature, body modification, and artifacts of global capitalism. The latest chapter will focus on soybeans and the process of soy milkmaking, using the liquid as a video projection surface.

"I have a fascination with these underlying networks of labor and materials—it comes to me quite organically, because my family worked in factories, and my dad ran a factory in China," he says. The simplicity of Fan's persistent thematic inquiries (how is something made? where, by whom, and for what purpose?) allows for a current of complex themes to emerge, which the artist prods and unravels. Fan's sculptural interventions echo the concepts at the heart of his work. In *Bivalve I* and *Bivalve II*, both 2023, bubbling, glass forms drip from shells made of resin. The pieces are situated in an industrial frame, asking viewers to confront the ways that organic materials are embedded in complex systems of labor, and how they endure in the face of destruction and extraction.

Though he confronts the viewer with these heady questions, Fan understands that he is implicated, too. "I extend these questions and apply them to myself," he asserts. "How am I made? What am I made of?"



Jes Fan, Bivalve I, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

# OCULA

#### Form and Function Come Alive at ICA, Philadelphia

**Stephanie Bailey** 

Riffing off the term for any object within a building that is portable, curators Alex Klein and Cole Akers have created a spectrum that moves from readymade to sculpture in *Moveables* (18 August–17 December 2023).

On one end of the gallery hall, Ken Lum's two sculptures made from store-bought furniture, *The Photographer or The Mirror*? and *The Curse is Come Upon Me*. (both 2023), are simultaneously conjoined and divided by a freestanding wall...

Nearby, a lone ottoman—apparently ordered by a colleague of Lum's and loaned for this exhibition—sits under a spotlight... All of which raises a question about value: when this ottoman leaves the gallery, presumably to resume its function, will it remain an artwork?

Hannah Levy massages that question into striking steel sculptures that reference the French Art Nouveau architect Hector Guimard, who designed the Paris Métro's wrought-iron entrances, and was interested in accessible, affordable objects and structures...

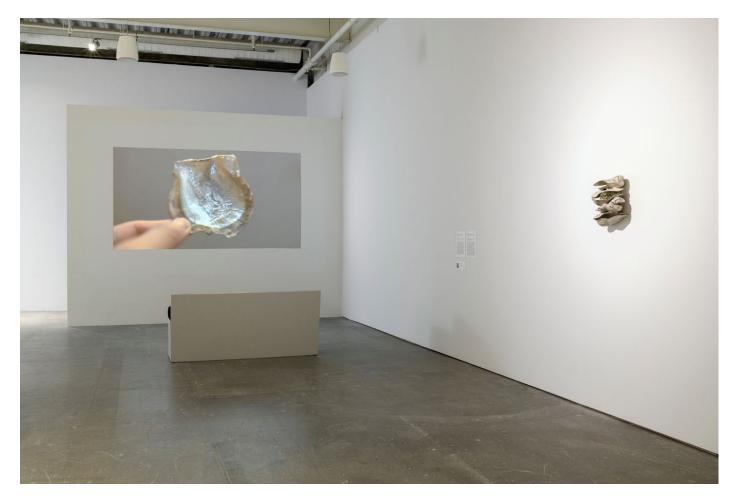
Materially, Levy's works seem to defy fragility—a resistance that is accentuated by the sharpness of the artist's sculptural forms. Jes Fan's compositions, on the other hand, lean into their precarity. *Diagram XXI* (2021), for instance, layers fine, leaf-like, sea-green aqua-resin sheets cast from parts

Left to right: Hannah Levy, *Untitled*; *Untitled* (both 2023). Exhibition view: *Moveables*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Courtesy the artist; Collection of Deborah Dupré and Richard Rothberg; and Casey Kaplan Gallery. Photo: Constance Mensh.



Jes Fan, *Rack II* (2022). Metal, resin, pigment, fibreglass, glass. Exhibition view: *Moveables*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery. Photo: Constance Mensh.

of the body on a wall to create wave-like shelves that encase a bulbous blown-glass glass drop within their folds. In *Rack II* (2022), resin sheets hang like wet towels from a green metal rack alongside glass lumps.



Left to right: Jes Fan, *Palimpsest* (2023); Diagram XXI (2023). Exhibition view: Moveables, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (18 August–17 December 2023). Courtesy the artist, Empty Gallery, and Andrew Kreps Gallery. Photo: Constance Mensh.

Screened on the wall is *Palimpsest* (2023), an HD video that transforms the three-year process that Fan undertook collaborating with scientists from the University of Hong Kong to implant oysters with the four Chinese characters for "Pearl of the Orient"—Hong Kong's colonial sobriquet—into a poetic layering of ambient sounds and images.

The video shows these characters—which are made from a shimmering, pearlescent material—being placed in the internal membrane of an oyster shell. Subtitles note that pearls are produced as a natural reaction to irritants; an act of transformation triggered by an incursion and an instinct to survive.

As if to mirror that state, Left and right halves of torso, stacked (2022), arranges two pigmented aqua-resin casts of the artist's body to create a mollusc form that encloses a glass orb injected with selenium—a mineral that oysters are rich in.

The natural and the artificial are thus fused into a single form—a fusion that reaches its figurative climax in totemic sculptures by Oren Pinhassi. Made from sand, burlap, and plaster, each figure is perched on a rough stone plinth, as if to amplify a primordial likeness....

# **ARTFORUM**

#### OPENINGS: JES FAN Cassie Packard on the art of Jes Fan



Jes Fan, *Systems III*, 2018, silicone, glass, epoxy, melanin, estradiol, wood, 19 × 48 × 28". From the series "*Systems*," 2018.

In 2018, Jes Fan, then in residence at Brooklyn arts nonprofit Recess, approached a local forhire synthetic-biology lab with an unusual request. The artist, whose conceptually and materially complex work often showcases his facility with glassblowing—which he sharpened while studying at the Rhode Island School of Design—commissioned the laboratory to synthesize eumelanin for use as a sculptural material. The black or brown biopigment is found in organisms across taxonomic kingdoms. Among humans, however, it is racialized matter, synonymous with phenotypic constructions that have historically been deployed to naturalize structural oppression and violence, framing skin color as something that must be tracked and policed. Fan, who splits his time between New York and Hong Kong, where he was raised, is cognizant of racist schemata in which people of color are cast as potential contaminants to whiteness-a

a hideously tenacious idea that has informed American anti-miscegenation laws and that led to the violent stigmatization of Asian populations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The eumelanin, sloshing darkly in its test tubes for the artist's early projects at Recess, materially foregrounded this racialized contagion discourse: Fan had the substance engineered using *E. coli*, bacteria present in healthy human and animal intestines but also famously capable of causing infection (and infectious panic).



Jes Fan, *Diagram XIII* (detail), 2021, resin, selenium glass, glass, pigments,  $36 \times 10 \times 7^{"}$ . From the series "*Diagrams*," 2018–.

Fan filled dimpled, droopy blown-glass globes with translucent silicone, used as a soft-tissue substitute for cosmetic or reconstructive plastic surgery, and injected it with the fetishized and feared eumelanin. A window onto the enmeshment of nature and culture, the glossy vessels-their interiors now richly filamented, spattered, and flecked-put the construction of race on display, the glass cells sagging like wilted vivaria under the material's projected meaning. In his 2018 "Systems" series, the artist presented these vesicles alongside others containing ready-made chemicals such as pharmaceutical estrogen and testosterone, which he began working with around the time of his own transition. Commodified, legislated, and pathologized with cruel vigor amid bans on gender-affirming care, these hormones are, as scholar Sophie X. Guo has written, tangled up with what Paul B. Preciado has termed the

"pharmacopornographic era," in which control and resistance operate on the biomolecular level. Fan arranged the assorted globules in fleshy, resin-and-silicone-coated scaffolding, conjuring the concertina'd systems—chemical, medical, legal, informatic, technological, economic, biopolitical—through which such molecules typically travel. The suspension of their flow by the "Systems" sculptures hints at the potential for these substances to be powerfully reconceptualized or literally reconfigured: hacked, disordered, made unmanageable.



Jes Fan, Systems III, 2018, silicone, glass, epoxy, melanin, estradiol, wood,  $19 \times 48 \times 28$ ". From the series "Systems," 2018.

Evoking the slice-and-dice aesthetic of medical illustrations, the corporeal is fragmented and repeated ("cloned") to the point of illegibility in Fan's ongoing "Diagrams" series, 2018-. Again, literalism begets abstraction: After applying silicone directly to body parts (a nape, a shoulder blade) belonging to gueer friends, lovers, or himself, Fan scrambles distinctions between interior and exterior by making casts from the molds. He sands the resultant Aqua-Resin carapaces to an erotically smooth, mottled finish and installs them as if they were modular shelving. Their sloping surfaces bear blistered glass sacs, which faintly call to mind nineteenth-century Chinese painter Lam Qua's sensual portraits of men and women afflicted by severe tumors—the patients of an American doctor and missionary by the name of Peter Parker. (Several reproductions of these works are tacked onto the walls of Fan's studio.) The transfiguration of flesh into furniture emphasizes the biopolitical alienation and biomedical commodification of the human body and its parts; it also implies an ontological fluidity or lability wherein a body could be anything.



Jes Fan, Left torso, four times, 2023, Aqua-Resin, glass, pigment, metal, approx.  $58 \times 31 \times 8''$ .

The rangy, celadon-colored roots that hold together an abstracted corpus in sculptures such as Left torso, four times, 2023, literalize Fan's fondness for "stolonic strategies," a concept introduced by neuroscientist Deboleena Roy in her 2018 book Molecular Feminisms: Biology, Becomings, and Life in the Lab. The idea is based on stoloniferous grass, which grows horizontally across the surface of the ground and constantly puts out "feelers." Roy locates an ethics in the organism's "reaching toward and touching of an always unfixed and incompletely knowable other, in search of a response—any response," without any expectation. In his own stolonic thinking, Fan's feelers have increasingly crept toward matters of nonhuman life via his explorations of other organisms' materiality, modes of being, and entanglement with humans (an interpenetration that is quite apparent in his use of hormones and melanin derived from soy and E. coli, respectively). For his 2021 "Networks" series, Fan cultivated black mold, which is both a contaminant that causes adverse health effects and a substance used for food preservation. Out of his care for and attunement to this other form of life emerged filaments that snaked through a sprawling glass reticulation evoking test tubes while upending the clinical glassware's isolationist verticality.



"Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option," writes anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in The Mushroom at the End of the World (2015), a book that examines the social lives of matsutake. In other words, we can be damaged or extinguished by such contact, but it can also occasion growth, resilience, or beauty. In his ongoing "Sites of Wounding" project, the first chapter of which was presented at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong between March and June of this year, Fan highlighted organically occurring instances where "the site of contamination becomes the site of regeneration." To defend against foreign objects that slip into their shells, oysters secrete nacreous layers that transform the contaminant into a pearl. In a materialsemiotic project undertaken with Hong Kong scientists between 2020 and 2023, the artist implanted the mantles of native Akoya oysters with small, sculptural Chinese characters for "Pearl of the Orient," a colonialist moniker for Hong Kong. The irritated mollusks responded by covering the characters with nacre-the process unfurled like a slow, lustrous embossing. This poetic act of biohacking metaphorizes colonialism as a vector of infection, as it so often literally has beensomething that postcolonial subjectivity responds to like an antibody. The video Palimpsest, 2023, portrays an ambivalent interspecies interaction marked by care as well as by violence; scenes of oyster cultivation (a practice in Hong Kong that predates British colonization) are intercut with close-up shots of Fan prying open the mollusks and the angry bubbling of their soft yellow mantles, studded with the occasional pearl. I WANT IT TO SWALLOW ITS OWN NAME, reads a caption along the bottom of the screen.

Jes Fan, *Left and right knee, grafted*, 2023, Aqua-Resin, glass, pigment, 12 × 9 × 12".

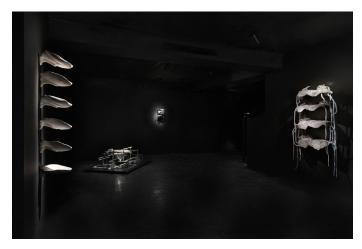


Jes Fan, Palimpsest, 2023, HD video, color, sound, 5 minutes 39 seconds.

The next chapter of "Sites of Wounding" opens at Hong Kong's M+ museum this month and builds on Fan's exploration of generative contamination as well as on his interest in human bodies via biomedical aestheticization; the ways in which they are valued, commodified, parceled out, and atomized; and their capacity for transformation and resistance. Fan made casts of computed tomography scans of his own organs and bones, which he abstracted through shifts in scale. Inspired by the ancient practice of consecrating statues of Buddha-which was done by hiding scrolls, herbs, ashes, and human viscera inside of them—Fan embedded several sculptures into the walls of M +, allowing blown-glass components to ooze through its holes and cracks. The glass's brown hue mimics that of agarwood, a resinous material that is formed via fungal infection and is used in luxury perfumes, religious ceremonies, and traditional medicine. The heartwood, long cultivated in China, has a potent balsamic aroma, which might be the reason Hong Kong (the phrase translates to "Fragrant Harbor" in English) is so named. A tiered sculpture trails its stolons on the floor and they extend toward something unknown, anticipating new connections to the outside world with an inherent bravery.

Cassie Packard is an art writer based in Brooklyn.

## e-flux



Jes Fan, *Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1* at Empty Gallery, installation view, 2023. Photos: Michael Yu.



Jes Fan, *Left and right knee, grafted*, 2023. Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Andrew Kreps Gallery.

#### Jes Fan's "Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1"

In one corner of Jes Fan's latest exhibition is a glass globe that fits snugly into a receptacle resembling a half-opened, upright clam's shell. Titled *Left and right knee, grafted* (all works 2023) and installed on a ledge in the curve of the staircase that leads down into the gallery, the sculpture's treasure is only visible from above; from below, only its undulating, opal façade can be seen. The body parts and procedure referenced in the artwork's title are hardly, if at all, discernible in the artwork's form; an obtuseness compounded by its relatively inaccessible position in the exhibition space. Like the "pearl" it protects, this artwork reveals its meaning only in glimpses.

Indeed, even the exhibition's figurative sources are hidden in plain sight: all of these seemingly abstract sculptures are cast from knees, chests, and torsos. Arranged in a vertical line, *Left and right knees*, *three times* is composed of six wall-mounted aqua resin basins, each approximately the same size and shape and spaced evenly apart. Despite the mathematical connotations of its title, the sculpture resembles an outlandish cascading fountain adorned with esoteric insignia. Fan mimicked an oyster shell's palette by sanding various pigments yellows, pinks, browns, and blues—onto aqua resin surfaces. Oysters are the first subject in Fan's iterative artistic project on regeneration in sites of injury.

Other works, like *Left torso, four times,* a quartet of jellyfish-like steel and aqua resin construc-

tions, also bear the artist's trademark psychedelic blooms. Closer inspection reveals, however, that the sculpture's seduction is superficial: the proverbial fountain has dried up, save for small urine-colored puddles—pigmented glass shards that have been melted down and left over in each vessel. The artwork's repeated bodily constitutions yield only variations on excretory emptiness. That the artist has intentionally obfuscated the physiognomic accuracy and origin of these indexed body parts is noteworthy, given the objectifying and reductive appraisal of artists, like Fan, who identify as trans.

The glass form ensconced within Left and right knee, grafted is split down the middle. A trained glassmaker, Fan created the effect by inserting two blowpipes into a single goblet during the glass-blowing process, bifurcating the glass and creating a pair of ventricular chambers. The artist complemented these traditional techniques with the use of digital software to model and augment the only floor-based works in the exhibition, Bivalve I and II. Held just a few inches above the floor by complex steel armatures, their patterned carapaces conceal glass components which—as in the case of Left and right knee, grafted—can only be seen from awkward angles. While Fan's previous glass sculptures suspended bodily substances such as hormones and skin pigments, these shells reveal only transparent and empty glass spheres. The question of why Fan goes to such lengths to obscure them is addressed by the five-minute video Palimpsest.

Accompanied by a wordless, ASMR-like soundtrack and panoramic views of the Hong Kong harbor, lyrical subtitles narrate Fan's nearly three-year research, alongside scientists from the University of Hong Kong, into native oyster species. Intrigued by the process of pearl formation, during which oysters secrete lustrous nacre over foreign objects, Fan experimented with implanting four Chinese characters spelling out Hong Kong's moniker, Pearl of the Orient, into four live oysters. He later sandwiched the oysters between two plates of glass before firing them in a kiln. *C is for you* is a tiered, stainless-steel display of these charred glass plates, sans oysters and letters. Here as elsewhere in the exhibition, the artefact of that process is an absence.

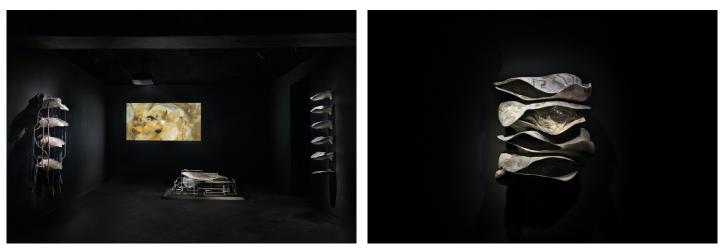
Understood collectively, these studies in physical reconstruction and withheld information might be understood as Fan's response to our society's tendency to sensationalize bodily fetish and harm, especially when it comes to gender and sexual embodiment. Like the oysters in *Palimpsest*—which consume, write over, and aestheticize an essentialist identity—the mesmerizing veneers of the exhibited artworks double as disguises, frustrating those viewers who expect trauma or revelation from art.





Jes Fan, Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1 at Empty Gallery, installation views, 2023. Photos: Michael Yu.

# **ART PAPERS**



Jes Fan, Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1 at Empty Gallery, installation views, 2023. Photos: Michael Yu.

#### Of Oysters, Roaches, and New Pessimism in Hong Kong

Arriving at Empty Gallery is always an experience. There's getting to Tin Wan in the first place a part of Hong Kong that feels like a world unto itself on its peripheral downtown perch along the edge of Aberdeen Harbor. Then there's the lift that takes you up to the 19th floor of a nondescript high-rise that hosts this two-floor black box space where art functions as the light in the dark. Such was the case with works by Tishan Hsu and Jes Fan, whose solo exhibitions each occupy one floor.

In Fan's show, Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1, blown glass orbs glow under spotlights as they slump over metal frames and ooze from resin slabs composed to invoke the surface of oyster shells. A pigmented aqua resin vessel holds two glass orbs in *Left and right knee, grafted* (2023), while fine, pigmented aqua resin sheets are layered like waves to form a square on the wall in *Diagram XIX* (2023), out of which a glass orb seems to excrete itself. Nearby, square glass sheets are stacked at intervals on a stainless steel tower frame, in *C is for you* (2023). Each of the sheets was kiln-fired with an oyster shell so that it holds the impression of its shape, as well as ashy traces of what once was.

Palimpsest (2023), a single-channel video projected on the wall, introduces the ideas that infuse the show. This dreamlike study shows pearls being grown by implanting the mantle tissue of oysters native to Hong Kong with delicately cut Chinese characters for "pearl of the orient," Hong Kong's colonial nickname. As the sounds of shucking and the clicking of underwater life define an ambient, pared-down soundtrack, images take on the details of an oyster's internal flesh, the waters in which they reside, a shell in hand. Through subtitles, we learn that oysters produce pearls in reaction to an intrusion, and thus in defense of their autonomy, and we are told of the artist's desire for the oyster to swallow its own name to turn into itself. Words beginning with C are then listed—for example, "C is for colony," which Hong Kong once was, and "C is for change," what Hong Kong is experiencing now.

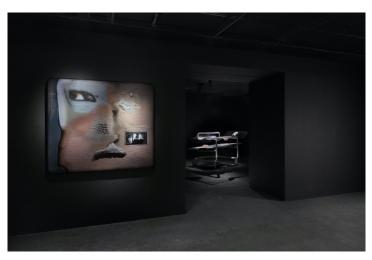




Jes Fan, *Palimpsest* (still), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.



Tishan Hsu, *double-breath-1*, 2023. UV cured inkjet, acrylic, silicone, ink on wood. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Tishan Hsu, *screen-skins* at Empty Gallery, installation view, 2023. Photo: Michael Yu.

Palimpsest is also a visual index for the sculptures in the room. Pigmented resin sheets mimic the green swells of the city's seascape, while glass orbs referencing the iridescent matter that oysters produce in response to an imposition are reflected in the mirrored surfaces of shopping malls, all of which Fan weaves into Palimpsest. The connections between meaning and context seem endless here. Take Oyster Bay, a shoreline on Lantau Island that was abundant with oysters but has been filled in with reclaimed sand for development alongside a vast swath of the sea. What metaphorical pearl might be produced from this incursion? What iridescence might grow as a result? If "C is you," then who are we?

Questions such as these resonate across Hong Kong, like the murmuring rumble of an ever-populated present that holds bodies in uncanny tension—something Tishan Hsu seems to manifest one floor above in screen-skins. Works composed of wooden panels coated in UV-cured inkjet prints depict warped mesh fields, on which images are printed, like the black-and-white silhouette pressing its hands against a television screen in *double-breath 1* (2023). Each composition is washed with undulating tones of pale fluorescent blue, corpulent pink, and sandy ocher. Silicone forms invoking bodily orifices create pustules and wounds across dermal surfaces.

It's all very *Videodrome*. That body horror manifests in *phone-breath-bed 3* (2023), a sculpture presented in its own small room. A silicone face emerges out of a Perspex panel, where, lower down, a silicone slab forms a womblike concave depression. The panel hovers over the form of a hospital bed with the support of gray plastic piping, whose mattress is a screen-skin painting with creased dermal folds framing silicone protrusions that swell from the flatness. In its expression of a body that has become enmeshed with the technologies and apparatus designed to keep it alive, the sculpture harmonizes with the oyster shell traces burned into glass downstairs in Fan's show—both expressions of a hybrid, post-human singularity.

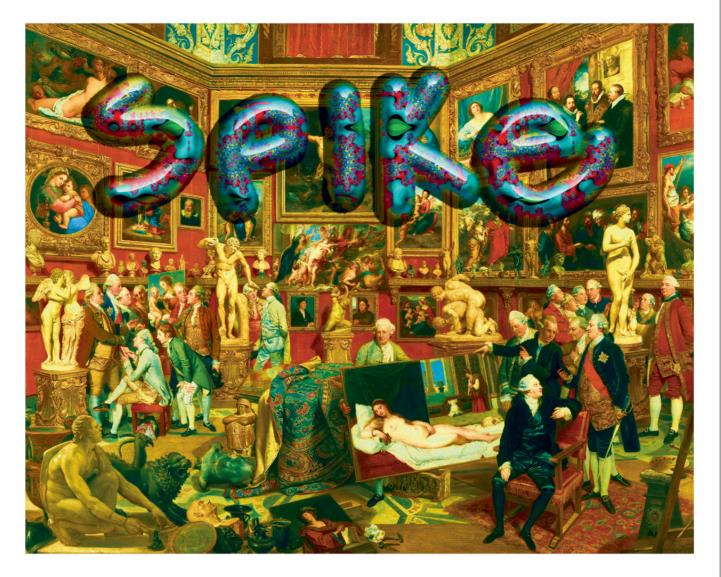
But while Fan's exploration of nature is a metaphor for a mutational resilience—growths created from fragmented occupations produce something beautifully reflective—Hsu's implosion of the body into the frames of technology visualizes a terrifying future.



Tishan Hsu, *phone-breath-bed 3*, 2023. polycarbonate, silicone, stainless steel wire cloth, UV cured inkjet, wood, steel. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.







#### CLOSED DUE TO COLONIALISM, ELITISM, AND A PRIVATE DINNER.

The Museum Issue

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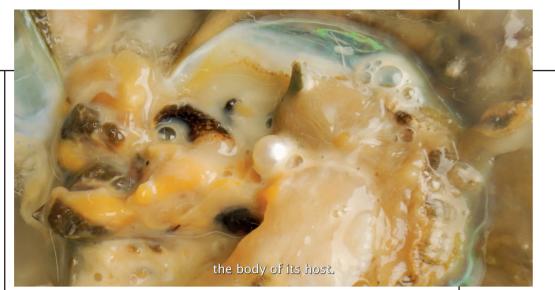
### **HONG KONG**

### Flesh of **My Flesh**

#### **JES FAN** "SITES OF WOUNDING: CHAPTER 1" **EMPTY GALLERY** 18 MAR - 6 MAY 2023

Across the road from Empty Gallery, at the Aberdeen waterfront, fishing boats unload their catches every morning at a local seafood market. This briny atmosphere is vividly conjured within the gallerv at Jes Fan's (\*1990) latest solo exhibition, "Sites of Wounding: Chapter 1," which takes pearl farming as a starting point for the artist's expanding inquiry into extractive industries.

For the past three years, Fan has worked with Pinctada fucata, a pearloyster species native to the waters around Hong Kong. These mollusks are prized for their strong nacre (the iridescent inner lining of their shells), which makes them commercially viable for industrial pearl cultivation. Fan's wallmounted sculpture Diagram XIX (2023) renders a stack of four oyster-shaped forms in smooth aqua-resin, with dapples of pink, slate, and sage that simultaneously evoke the polychromatic



Still from Palimpsest, 2023

patterns of seashells and military camouflage. A glass bubble expands from the mouth of one mollusk as if blown by the sculpture in situ.

Its delicate appearance belies the actual force involved in pearl cultivation, as depicted in the video Palimpsest (2023). Glorious scenes of glittering waves and spiral shoals of fish are juxtaposed with footage of hands gouging open live oysters and using tweezers to insert pearl nuclei into their gonads. Over time, the onscreen captions explain, the organisms secrete nacre to cover these foreign objects - a defensive mechanism that yields the coveted gems. Close-ups of glistening oyster flesh are accompanied by sounds of sucking, squelching, and clicking - a visceral reminder of violence that resonates throughout the exhibition space.

Fan connects this process of injury and assimilation to negotiations of foreign power in Hong Kong, which is still fetishistically referred to as the "Pearl of the Orient." In the video, the oysters are implanted with nuclei shaped like the Chinese characters for the former British colony's sobriquet; "I want it to swallow its own name/And turn its name into itself," the captions state. There are glimpses of the cityscape reflected in a bus stop's plexiglass advertising panel and the mirrored ceiling above the escalators of a shopping mall. Hong Kong is portrayed as a mirage invoked by the imperatives of politics and global capital.

Yet there is power in mutability (and mutation). In the floor-based sculptures Bivalve I and Bivalve II (both 2023), aqua-resin shells that span nearly a meter wide are fused to pipe-like armatures. Despite their rigid material, the oval plates exude the semblance of flexibility, curving and draping over the angular metal frames as large blownglass blobs drip from their undersides. The works are reminiscent of two of Fan's earlier series: "Systems" (2018), in which glass sacs incorporating melanin and human sex hormones slouch on

### VIEWS

## **HONG KONG**

wooden lattices; and "Networks" (2021), comprising sets of interconnected glass vessels designed to incubate black mold. This context heightens the ambiguity of the new pieces: Are the tubular constructions of "Bivalves" a cage, or a kind of mycelial feeding system to which the mollusks are symbiotically attached?

Interspecies entanglement is taken further in works featuring aquaresin casts of the artist's body. Left torso, four times (2023) resembles a wallmounted shelving unit composed of thick metal vines and replicated breastplates. A tumorous glass lump is precariously balanced on each of the anatomical ledges, which have the same variegated patterning as the shell sculptures. Installed in a nook by the gallery stairs, the vase-like Left and right knee, grafted (2023) contains a glass mass that seems to well up with astonishing fluidity. By figuring the human body as a reproducible and functional object in these hybrid forms, Fan inverts the hierarchical relations between extractor and commodity. The sculptures are disturbingly brutal in their fragmentation of the body, but also captivating for their protean dismantling of fixed taxonomies.



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Bivalve II, 2023 Aqua resin, glass, pigments and metal



Left torso, four times, 2023 Aqua resin, glass, pigments, metal

Shown on a plinth, C is for you (2023), a set of glass slides in a sleek metal grid, combines the hard-edged geometry and seriality of minimalist sculpture with the utilitarian design of display cases in natural history museums. Fan molded four oysters within square panes of glass, then fired the pieces together in a kiln. The resulting objects are small glass coffins; the ashes of the incinerated mollusks are contained in the hollows left by their shells.

There is something miraculous about the fact that oysters evolved to make pearls from grit, or that sand struck by lightning can turn into glass. Fan's exhibition acknowledges the wondrous possibilities of transmutation, yet never loses sight of the destructive agents that equally shape existence. "Sites of Wounding" is as much an assertion of resistance to containment and categorization as a memorial to the lives wrecked by anthropogenic violence, whose specters suffuse the atmosphere like salt carried on a sea breeze.

**Ophelia Lai** 

## artasiapacific |

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#### JES FAN · CLUB ATE · NIKHIL CHOPRA INCI EVINER · KARA WALKER

ISSUE 132 MAR/APR 2023

# JES FAN

# PRECIOUS WOUNDS

BY MIMI WONG

In late 2022, for the first time since the pandemic began, I was able to fly the 15 hours from the United States to Hong Kong with my mother to visit our family. We had been planning the reunion with my relatives for more than one year. Still, I could not have anticipated how emotional I would feel to be able to travel again to a place that had always felt like a cultural home. Just three months earlier, artist Jes Fan was making a similar journey from New York to reunite with his immediate family, whom he hadn't seen in three years. He landed the day after the government ended Hong Kong's quarantine measures. "I arrived with a full plane of babies," he remembered, alluding to the many parents bringing their one- and two-year-olds back with them for the first time. "They were crying, but it was adorable."

Another impetus for the homecoming was so Fan could prepare for his solo exhibition "Sites of Wounding: Part 1," which opens in March at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery. Back in September, he had emailed me a photo revealing the glistening half of an oyster shell embedded with the Chinese character  $\mathfrak{R}$ . Fan had been working with local fishermen to cultivate the colonial moniker "Pearl of the Orient" (東方之珠) inside a species of akoya pearl oyster indigenous to Hong Kong's waters. The upcoming show will feature the actual shells as part of his *Mother of Pearl* series (2020–22), which builds upon the fundamental act of naming. "To identify, you have to be named," Fan reflected.

"How do you remember something that doesn't have a name?" The issue of identity is a particularly poignant one for Hongkongers in this moment as they attempt to reconcile Hong Kong's past as a former British colony with its present and future under Chinese rule.

On the cold, rainy morning in January that I visited the artist's studio in Brooklyn, New York, we spent a lot of time reminiscing about Hong Kong and the ways we've seen it change. Perhaps it has long been a place of transformation under shifting regimes of power. As Fan was telling me about how the British redirected water from farms in order to serve the growing population on Hong Kong Island, I asked if he's always had an interest in the region's history. He replied: "The interest in Hong Kong really spiked in the three years of not returning home, and not seeing my family, and then going through this process of also reflecting on my ten years in America." Though born in Canada, Fan spent the majority of his life in Hong Kong before moving to the US. The more time he's been living away, the more questions he found himself asking, such as: "Who am I?" and "What is my relationship to Hong Kong?" For many in the diaspora, it is a relationship in constant flux.



Installation view of (from left to right) Wounding, Fragrant Harbor, and Apparatus, 2022, at "The Milk of Dreams," 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo by Michael Yu.



Xenophoria, 2018-20, still from video with color: 7 min 35 sec.

As both a physical and psychological concept, the wound provides a rich metaphor for Fan's inquiry into the environmental and cultural transformations that have impacted Hong Kong. Handing me an oyster shell, which fits easily into the palm of my hand, he said: "If you think about the pearl, it's just a foreign object that's being housed or being hosted by the host, and because of that infection, it coats these layers of nacre over the interior nucleus of the infection." In this instance, the infection results in something precious. In Fan's conception, we can treat the wound as a site of healing—and as an adaptation necessary for survival.

Next, Fan led me to a shelf from which he held up a partial body casting. "This used to be my old chest before I had surgery, and I just didn't want to tell anyone during Venice," he said, referring to the mold he made of his body prior to his operation that he then incorporated into the three sculptures, *Wounding, Fragrant Harbor*, and *Apparatus* (all 2022) he showed at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, "The Milk of Dreams." He explained that he 3D-scanned, printed, and assembled the casts into a tower. The way the chest forms have been painted—beginning with a gray base, with layers of color applied on top and then sanded back—emphasizes a process that then becomes the material. Fan's process mirrors a natural one. For an organism like the oyster, the layering of nacre is what creates its pearlescent sheen. Pooling inside these stacked casts are blown-glass forms and dripping, milky silicone components injected with prolactin, a hormone found in both breast milk and tears.

A preoccupation of Fan's work is the blurred boundary between what's artificial and what's natural. He frequently probes the many processes of human intervention into our bodies to explore the fluidity of our identities. Raising questions about the construction of race, lab-grown melanin—the substance in our bodies that affects skin color—appears as thick, black liquid in the video *Xenophoria* (2018–20). Skin itself is a conduit, Fan realized, when he began taking testosterone in 2016 and literally applying the hormone as part of his transition. While completing a 2016 residency at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City, he contemplated the ways in which biology, including the human body, can be manipulated or even manufactured. "Body-building is a type of craft," he said, by way of an example.

To underscore his point, Fan used testosterone, the male sex hormone, to make actual craft items, with their traditional associations of domesticity and femininity, such as a candle, in *Testo Candle* (2016) and bar of soap, *Testo-soap* (2017).



Xenophoria, 2018-20, still from video with color: 7 min 35 sec.



Detail of *Networks* series, 2020- , phycomyces zygospores, silicone, and borosilicate glass, dimensions variable, at "The Stomach and the Port," Liverpool Biennial 2021. Photo by Stuart Whipps.



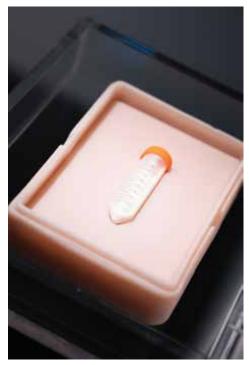
Installation view of Networks (for Expansion) and Networks (for Rupture), 2021, phycomyces zygospores, silicone, and borosilicate glass, 116.8×61×127 cm and 122×177.8×61×cm, at "Soft Water Hard Stone," New Museum Triennial 2021, New York. Photo by Pierre Le Hors.

FEATURES

Incorporating hormones into his works was a way to play with notions of gender. Continuing his interest, he asked his mother to donate her urine so he could harvest her estrogen and turn it into beauty cream for *Mother is a Woman* (2018). "That was so much about our skin being porous carriers of our identity, and not just identity, but also ways of relation." An infection, he proposed, operates as just another point of contact—whether between individuals, within a person, or at the bacterial level. Confronted with our new normal of living with Covid-19, he wondered, "Are we also vectors of contagions?"

In 2020, Fan approached a friend whom he described as a "biohacker" to help grow a specific black mold, *Aspergillus niger*, that resembles human hair and produces citric acid, a common food preservative. In his studio, Fan showed me some of the samples still encased in handblown glass. Fan mentioned that he originally studied glassmaking in the highly technical and conceptually oriented program at the Rhode Island School of Design but discovered he was more focused on process rather than technique. He attached these vessels, shaped like organs or tumors—what would be deemed as "failures" by traditional glassblowers because of their irregularities—to pipes filled with liquid culture containing the mold. The resulting *Networks* series (2021) allowed viewers to come up close and see the clusters of mycelia growing within the tubes. Reminiscent of an infection circulating within our bodies, the large-scale sculptures were directly inspired by reference diagrams of arteries and veins taped on the wall above Fan's desk.

It wasn't until his most recent trip to Hong Kong that Fan noticed another visual connection: on the computer screen, he brought up photos he had taken of high-rise



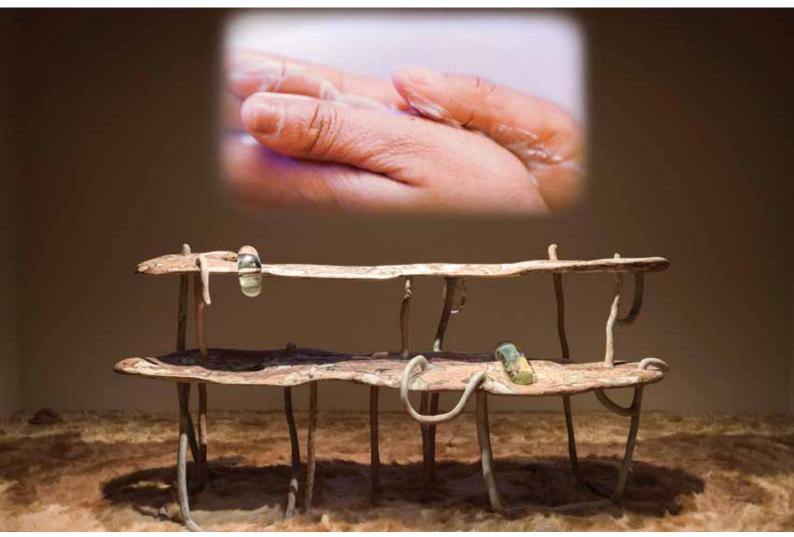
Detail of Mother Is A Woman (Cream), 2019, estrogen, lotion, test tube, silicone, and pigment, 25×20×8cm, at "Retrograde," Galerie du Monde, Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Felix Sze Chung Wong. Courtesy Galerie du Monde.

buildings and their tangle of exterior pipes the consequence of a densely populated metropolis where residents live stacked on top of one another. Though unintentional, the imagery must have lodged itself in his subconscious, he believes. In another photo Fan snapped in Hong Kong, the roots of a banyan tree grow in a rectangular pattern, tracing the gaps between the bricks on the ground. These common sights remind one of just how much the city is constructed but also embedded in the landscape.



Testo Candle, 2017, depo-testosterone, beeswax, and candle wick, 10×13×15cm. Photo by Jacob Schuerger.

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Installation view of (above) Mother Is A Woman, 2018, video with color: 4 min 34 sec; and (below) Diagram I, 2018, aqua resin, epoxy, aluminum, glass, and fiberglass, 110×218×51 cm, at "Mother Is A Woman," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2018. Photo by Michael Yu.

Taking a page from Hong Kong itself, Fan's work suggests that what's artificial and what's natural do not have to be mutually exclusive in order to be beautiful. Pearls, for instance, are farmed to perfection. Fan recalled something his father had once said about "queerness not being natural." The artist's tone was one of tenderness and free from judgment as he described his response: "We were in Tsim Sha Tsui at that moment, getting dim sum, and I was like, 'You know what? Tsim Sha Tsui used to be water. Is it natural that we're eating dim sum on this new land built by machines?"

For part two of his project "Sites of Wounding," Fan will dive even deeper into the etymology of Hong Kong's name. During his trip, he began researching agarwood, a species of tree once widely planted in the region and exported for use as incense. From the aroma came the name often used for Hong Kong, "Fragrant Harbor." But this desired scent only arises as a result of an infection in the tree. Farmers insert spikes into the wood, which then secretes a perfumed resin around the injury. Here, again, the site of a wound yields something valuable—perhaps even more so because wild agarwood is currently endangered. The disappearance of what once flourished in Hong Kong also begs the question of what can be preserved amid the territory's continuous cycles of change, transformation, wounding, and recovery.

https://artasiapacific.com/issue/jes-fan-precious-wounds?locale=en © 2023 ArtAsiaPacific

# ARTFORUM

#### "Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere" MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

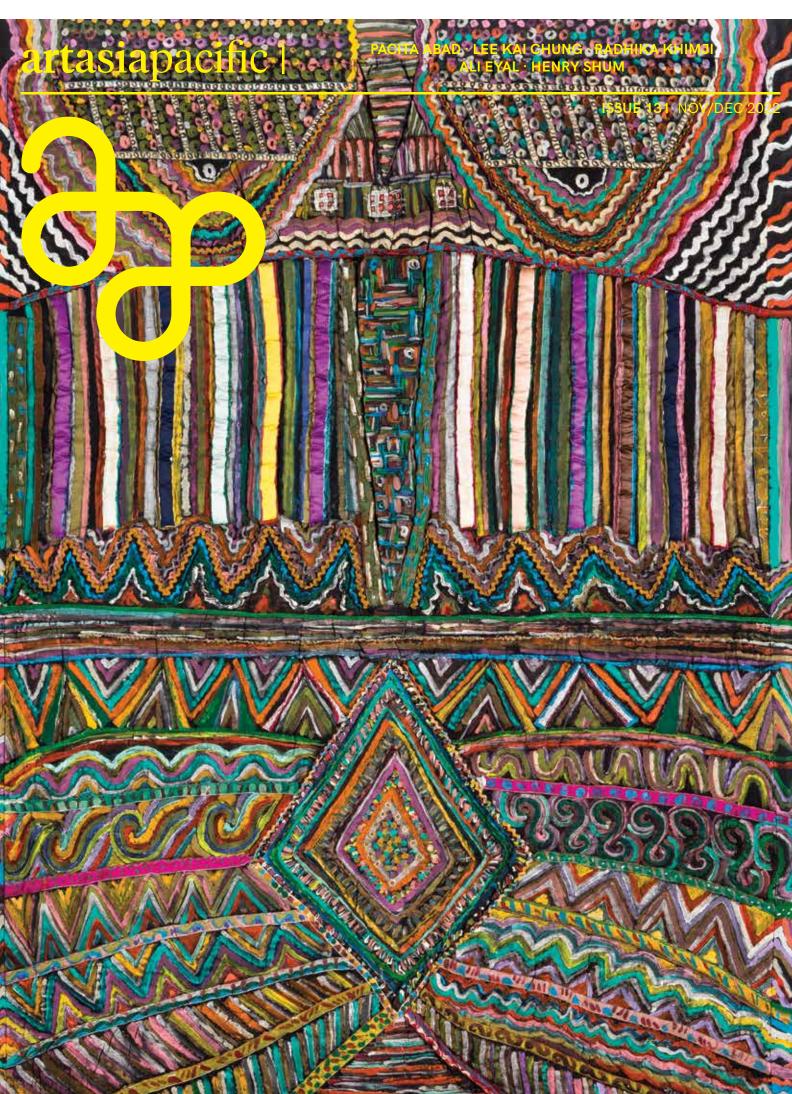
Life arises from difference. That's what biologist Lynn Margulis (1938–2011) averred when she proposed that endosymbiosis—the nesting of one unlike organism inside another—allowed for the evolution of multicellular entities on earth, and that various symbiotic unions remain integral to the flourishing of existence. Now accepted as scientific fact, Margulis's assertions suggest that we have been moving mosaics of interspecies communion from the very beginning. This paradigm elicits a reconsideration of the boundaries and possibilities of being "human," an intellectual project that might serve as an entry point for an ethical one, especially as we consider what a consciously interdependent and reciprocal relationship with the world around us might look like.

Margulis's portrait can be found alongside those of earthworms and tardigrades in artist/activist Claire Pentecost's pointedly heavy-handed fictional paper currency made with compost, soil-erg, 2012, which calls upon us to rethink what we value. Pentecost's contribution is the earliest work featured in the MIT List Visual Art Center's "Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere." Curated by Caroline A. Jones, Natalie Bell, and Selby Nimrod with research assistance by Krista Alba, the exhibition presents a diverse cohort of fourteen artists who think about and create with organic matter. The term "bio art" was coined in 1997 by Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac, who three years later famously debuted Alba, a rabbit able to phosphoresce because her genes had been spliced with those of a jellyfish. "Symbionts" centers on a new strain of bio artists eager to push beyond authorial genetic intervention. For the exhibiting artists, Margulis's symbiotic framework—braided with the wisdom of feminist New Materialism in its insistence on the social lives of matter and the utilization of Indigenous knowledge and natural science—offers a capacious alternative.

Getting into the muck of their materials, several of the artists enter into open-ended collaborations with organic matter, including networked organisms such as mycelia. Consider Nour Mobarak's crusty wall relief Reproductive Logistics, 2020. Mobarak embraced a vulnerable if winking partnership with saprophytic mycelia, allowing the fungi to partly consume the personal materials embedded beneath the brown mantle containing the filaments: a watercolor self-portrait and a colorful schematic of former sexual partners that incorporates hair and sperm. Špela Petric's surprisingly tender two-channel video installation Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoeisis, 2015, depicts a durational performance in which the artist/biologist stands before a bright light for twenty hours, using her shadow to affect the growth of cress. In contrast to the quick-fix idealism of techno-utopianism, Petric's painstaking interspecies coaction is predicated upon discomfort and boredom, affective states integral to many kinds of growth.

Other artists playfully subvert the form of the vitrine or the petri dish, poking holes in claims that such objects give us control over or provide a barrier to the outside world. In Jes Fan's Systems II, 2018, blown-glass sacs droop over a fleshy resin-and-wood armature reminiscent of both medical gas piping and petrified intestines. The deflated globes are clouded or streaked with synthesized biological materials of social significance, such as eumelanin, which is responsible for skin pigmentation, as well as pharmaceutically manufactured female and male sex hormones that, among other things, enable gender transition. Nothing is hermetically sealed; the enmeshment of nature and culture is conveyed with a poetic literalism. Pierre Huyghe often works with aquariums, but for Spider, 2014, the artist directed museum staff to periodically release twenty cellar spiders directly into one of MIT List's galleries—indeed, the white cube becomes a shared vitrine. The administrative headache posed by Huyghe's project naturally brings up a dimension of institutional critique, which is taken up by Candice Lin's Memory (Study #2), 2016. Lion's mane mushrooms burst from a plastic bag, pushing through a red ceramic container's coralline tracery. Like Huyghe's work, the mushrooms take the piss out of the institution, in their case, literally: In order for them to grow, the artist has instructed the museum to feed the fungi a diet of distilled urine sourced from (consenting) employees. The presence of a piss-filled mister implicates the viewer, who may be tempted to spritz the thirsty fungi.

At turns sober and playful, urgent and irreverent, "Symbionts" sheds light on a paradigm shift in bio art as it prods us to acknowledge—intellectually, affectively—the depth of our structural and material entanglement with fellow travelers in the biosphere. What we do with that awareness is, of course, up to us.



## JES FAN *Nature and Nurture*



From JES FAN's Mother of Pearl (series (2020-22). Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

If gender and race are social constructs, then what lessons can the natural world offer about identity and its malleability? This question underlies the work of artist Jes Fan, who previously used organic materials such as bacteria, fungi, and bodily fluids to examine the intersections of art, biology, and human intervention. Born in Canada, raised in Hong Kong, and residing in Brooklyn, Fan traverses many boundaries as both a diasporic and trans artist. The photograph above documents a project in which he's been growing pearl oysters embedded with the Chinese characters 東方之珠. The manipulation of live mollusks winkingly plays on human-cultivated or "cultured" pearls, as well as Hong Kong's colonial moniker "Pearl of the Orient." In an upcoming issue of *ArtAsiaPacific*, New York desk editor Mimi Wong will reflect on how Fan's work complicates our understanding of what is beautiful, foreign, and unnatural.

THE SKETCH

https://artasiapacific.com/issue/jes-fan-nature-and-nurture?locale=en © 2022 ArtAsiaPacific

## **OCULA** Form and Being Collude in 'Transactions with Eternity'

By Noushin Afzali Berlin | 10 August 2022

Arranged across Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler's two-room gallery in Berlin, Transactions With Eternity (9 July–20 August 2022) takes its title from Rosmarie Waldrop's 2009 poem 'All Electrons Are (Not) Alike'.



Left to right: Jes Fan, Rack II (2022); Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'BEHIND THE SCENES (OFFICE VIDEOS SERIES 1)' (2022); Yong Xiang Li, *a break (by the bamboo wave)* (2022). Exhibition view: *Transactions With Eternity*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (9 July–20 August 2022). Courtesy Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler.

Waldrop's poem accentuates the 'power' of naming during the colonial conquest of the Americas, which had been prioritised over 'transactions with eternity'. Retelling the narrative of conquest, the poem calls into question the starting point of the United States' national identity.

Co-curators Sebastjan Brank and Catherine Wang have interpreted Waldrop's poem with 14 works by six international artists—among them, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Yong Xiang Li, and Diane Severin Nguyen—that challenge conventional understandings of being through the language of form.



Exhibition view: *Transactions With Eternity*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (9 July–20 August 2022). Courtesy Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler.

On the other side of the gallery space is a sturdy pale-greenish frame; an interlocking resin-coated metal skeleton with three bloated glass pieces attached, given near-erotic shapes.

Standing at almost 1.43 metres tall, Rack II (2022) is the latest work by multidisciplinary artist Jes Fan, whose similar juxtapositions of soft, fluid forms with rigid structures, are also on view in the Venice Biennale's central exhibition, The Milk of Dreams (23 April–27 November 2022).



Jes Fan, *Rack II* (2022). Exhibition view: *Transactions With Eternity*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (9 July–20 August 2022). Courtesy Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler.

Holding a BFA in Glass from the Rhode Island School of Design, Fan is known for sculptures that explore the social constructs of gender, race, and identity, and the hierarchies associated with these designations otherness, kinship, queerness, and diasporic politics. To this end, Fan's sculptures often utilise biological substances such as testosterone, estrogen, and melanin.

By injecting decaying biological matter into smooth, bulbous forms, the artist seeks to question and examine assumptions surrounding cultural values and what these values reject. For their sculptures at the Venice Biennale, for example, Fan was meant to use an incense containing prolactin—a protein enabling mammals to produce milk. However, they had to replace it with silicone due to the damp atmosphere of the Arsenale.



### "Retrograde": A Revival of Care

BY ANGELIQUE SANTOS

"Queer" is not just a signifier of one's sexuality but also a way of thinking. Exploring this notion for the celebratory Pride Month, curator Cusson Cheng invited 11 local and international artists to participate in the LGBTQ-themed exhibition "Retrograde," hosted by Galerie du Monde in Hong Kong. Instead of circulating the mainstream queer image, which boosts visibility often through performativity, Cheng chose a more subtle approach to reveal the sensibilities and injuries of the queer experience through works that blur the lines between nature and nurture, public and private.



JES FAN, Mother Is A Woman (Cream), 2019, estrogen, lotion, test tube, silicone, and pigment,  $25 \times 20 \times 8$  cm. Copyright Jes Fan. All images courtesy the artists and Galerie du Monde, Hong Kong.

At the entrance, Brooklyn-based artist Jes Fan's wall-mounted installation Mother Is A Woman (Cream) (2019) comprises an unassuming tube of cream. Made from a cultured estrogen extraction from Fan's mother's urine sample, the cosmetic cream was applied onto the visitors during Fan's previous show at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery, as an attempt to explore the possibility of kinship formed between the visitors and Fan's mother. Here, encased in an open silicone chest, the handmade cosmetic cream invited the visitors to delve into the idea of gender fluidity while affirming the mother's own individual boundary.

# Can art and biology come together to break down social constructs?

## Jes Fan

Multidisciplinary artist Jes Fan uses fungi, bacteria and hormones to produce unique pieces exploring the intersections of biology, identity and creativity

Portraits Jillian Freyer Writer Drew Zeiba



'I'm not interested in technique, I'm interested in process,' says the Brooklyn-based artist Jes Fan of his approach. Trained in the Rhode Island School of Design's famously conceptual glass department, Fan crafts with melanin and mould as much as glass or Aqua-Resin.

In his 2019 public project for Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, NY, for example, an interlocking resin-coated metal skeleton supported fleshy fibreglass blobs, like a body open to the air. In 2021, for the Liverpool Biennial and New Museum Triennial, Fan floated the fungus phycomyces in a mazelike grid of glass. Other projects have used squid ink, his mother's urine, and E. coli.

Riffing on the title of the main exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale, 'The Milk of Dreams', Fan looked into udders for his installation at the Arsenale. Simultaneously, he took an interest in incense, developing his own incense cones. Fan was raised in Hong Kong, a city named after the Cantonese phrase for 'incense harbour', perhaps due to its many aquilaria trees. When the tree is cut, it often becomes infected with fungus, causing it to secrete an aromatic resin. Such resins are referred to as 'tears', which led Fan to the discovery that breast milk and emotional tears share similar hormonal characteristics. 'There's this through line of thinking of how beauty is produced through sites of wounding or infection,' Fan notes.

His research culminated with a series of three sculptures for 'The Milk of Dreams', which manipulate 3D scanned and printed **>>** 



casts of his body. 'There's something that speaks to thinking about the body as an object,' says Fan. 'When you're trans, you think, "My body is just a material that I can manipulate in a way".' Sculpting, he says, can also be a process of shedding. 'I am someone who travels between cultures a lot and between genders a lot. I'm very sensitive to the translations required in moving from one space to another, the amount of shedding or taking on new skin.' By removing the body from recognisability and repeating its abstracted form, Fan visualises displacement over and over again. Creating levels of removal from 'the original' also satisfies the need 'to blow something up larger than life'. The resulting artworks blend the hi-tech biochemistry and 3D scanning - with more typical contemporary sculptural and movingimage practices and millennia-tested techniques such as glassblowing.

For his Venice sculptures, Fan initially intended to use an incense containing prolactin, the hormone that causes milk secretion in mammals. However, the damp atmosphere of the Arsenale – the former shipyard where the artwork is now on view would hamper burning, so instead, he created a sense of flowing smoke with hormoneinfused silicone. Silicone can appear skin-like, uncannily human, a facet Fan has exploited for projects such as Dermal Application (2018), which dripped flesh-toned webs of the stuff from the gallery wall. Despite its semi-organic appearance, it's one of the earlier synthetic polymers, and is often misspelled as one of its component elements, silicon - the basis of computer chips. 'Craft used to be technological; back in the day, the loom was the first computer,' Fan points out. Today's iPhone screens, he notes, are not some purely virtual space, but rather a space mediated by glass - in Apple's case, Gorilla Glass, which is created using a 'cumulative knowledge' that stretches back to early stained glass. 'The pure present is just the constant advance of the future,' he says. Still, he remains curious about juxtaposing 'a sense of the ultra-handmade' with his materials of choice, biomatter and glass.

Fan's biological practices often necessitate collaboration. For his 2018 residency at the

Clinton Hill nonprofit Recess, Fan worked with firm Brooklyn Bio to use genetically modified E. coli to generate melanin, which was then placed in sculptures, displayed in lab containers. Likewise, for his Mother of Pearl series (2020-22), Fan coordinated with Yan Wa-Tat, a University of Hong Kong scientist, and Yan's assistant William Leung, with the support of Iris Poon of Hong Kong's Empty Gallery, to explore the potential of 'naturally' occurring materials generated using contemporary, lab-based methods. Fan worked with oysters to etch pearls with characters representing the colonial moniker for Hong Kong, 'Pearl of the Orient'. 'It's another example of productivity or beauty occurring in sites of wounding,' he says, noting that pearls are, in fact, a response to a foreign body being trapped in the mollusc.

A series of photos on satin of the pearls featured in the 'Sex Ecologies' (2021-22) exhibition at Kunsthall Trondheim in Norway, and the images will be displayed alongside the physical pearls — as well as additional incense work and a new chapbook — at 'Sites of Wounding: Part 1' at Empty Gallery early next year. 'As you walk into the space, the gallery will be bisected, evoking the body of a bivalve,' Fan explains. 'Each sculpture will be emerging from sinuous curves from the floors or the walls, as though you have entered the body of a mollusc.' »

#### 'I travel between cultures and genders a lot. I'm very sensitive to the translations required'





Top, from left, Wounding; Fragrant Harbor and Apparatus, all in Aqua-Resin, metal, wood and silicone, part of Jes Fan's Venice Biennale installation Above, Dermal Application (2018), in pigmented silicone on gallery walls, part of the 2018 'Mother Is a Woman' exhibition at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery

As this species-bending project perhaps highlights, there's a grotesqueness to his work, but there's beauty in the grotesque. Fan plays on the tension between the repellent and the enticing, making elegant forms from matter we are conditioned to avoid - fungus, bacteria, urine, blood. Perhaps it all comes back to glass: 'I was in a patisserie earlier and I went totally full-on hedonist,' he says. 'I was like, "Let's order everything". After sharing the sweets with a friend, he remarked that 'desire is always more desirable behind glass', from window shopping to finding dates on apps.

'There's also something really erotic about the process of pumping these globules,' Fan says of hand-blowing the glass bulbs that frequently appear on his sculptures. 'The opposite pole of desire is actually fear, right? And so those are always a push and pull.' Glass has long been used to contain and display, either as vessels or would-be invisible gateways to something else. 'Not all of these cellular forms contain biological materials,' he says of his amorphous glass elements. 'But when they do, there's something about being able to offer someone holding it a looking glass.' He's explored this theme with projects such as Form Begets Function (2020), which reinterpreted the scholar shelves of Chinese antiquity. Turning these display elements into the display itself, Fan's work gives

visible and tactile form to not only the content of the glass, but the glass itself. 'There's this word in Cantonese, shou gan, which means "hand-feeling"; he explains, noting that it's similar to the academic term 'affective haptics', but used in everyday speech. 'I think another aspect of my work is the relation of the handmade and the hand-feeling.' The glass is not a frame for this other matter, rather it reveals the organising devices - be they bodily, social or technological – that corral biomatter.

In their insistent materiality, Fan's sculptures enact a kind of reversal: shifting the category of repellent or uncanny not by making its presence more decorated, but less. 'When you encounter the object, it looks really abstract,' he points out. 'Maybe that's the ultimate truth: these highly politicised substances - melanin, but also urine, semen, blood - are actually just so abstract.' Trying to search for some biological truth of gender or race, say, in progesterone or melanin is bald-facedly absurd: 'What is the smallest unit of race?' or 'What hormones define sex and gender?' are rhetorical questions Fan asks, to which the work rightly gives no answer: the 'truth' of these categories is that they are socially constructed. \* 'The Milk of Dreams' is showing until 27 November at the Venice Biennale, jesfan.com, labiennale.org, emptygallery.com

# Art in America

#### NOT ALL MICROBES

Most of the time, when we hear about microbes, the subject is their extermination: "Kills 99.9% of germs," exclaim the labels on popular disinfectants. We are at war, so the metaphor goes, with an invisible enemy that must be wiped out to keep us safe. Microbes are typically defined by our inability to see them with the naked eye: they are small living things, visible only under a microscope. These tiny life forms—including bacteria like E. coli, fungal microorganisms like yeast, and viruses like SARS-CoV-2—are everywhere, from door handles to toilet seats to park benches. They inhabit our bodies and our homes, thriving and multiplying in secret silence, until a hostile bleach-soaked rag arrives to annihilate them.

But martial metaphors miss the full picture. Only a minute percentage of bacterial organisms are dangerous, and many others actually play a significant role in keeping us safe. Over the past two decades, a wave of research has shown that the body's microbiome is full of organisms that regulate the immune system and protect against disease. Indeed, scientists have estimated that as much as 50 percent of the body's cells may be microbes. Some even call the gut the "second brain" because of the microbiotic environment's influence on the body's function. Changing attitudes toward these life-forms are perhaps most evident in what we eat. Trendy menus are now sprinkled with fermented foods like kombucha, kefir, and kimchi, which add "good" bacteria to the gut. The long-term health benefits of eating yogurt have been studied for more than a century: in 1905, zoologist Élie Metchnikoff sparked an international frenzy when he attributed the long lives of Bulgarians to their diet, which included plenty of fermented milk products.

Covid, initially linked in the press to its origins in Wuhan, China, also sparked a dangerous wave of racism, evident in growing numbers of anti-Asian incidents since March 2020. But even before the pandemic, artists were considering how systems of classification such as race are socially constructed through fear about contamination and difference. Jes Fan makes this literal in his work Systems II (2018), a wood and resin sculpture inspired by the networks of fibers that fungi and plant roots create. The wonky, earth-toned scaffold, resembling a hand-crafted system of pipes, is dotted with glass cells filled with transparent silicone. Suspended within the drooping, glob-like forms are flecks of different bodily substances: testosterone, estrogen, and eumelanin, the last a pigment that darkens skin. Fan specifically chose to produce the eumelanin by genetically modifying E. coli in order to invoke the terror of contamination, since some strains of the bacteria can cause food poisoning. In a white supremacist framework, meanwhile, darker skin color is used as a marker of supposed impurity, a way to discern and reject those who endanger the imagined sanctity of whiteness. Of course, in the body, eumelanin and E. coli work invisibly, at a microscopic level, manifested only through skin color and illness, respectively. Fan's sculpture gives visual expression to these substances, prompting the viewer to consider preconceptions about them: E. coli (most strains of which aid in digestion) as dangerous; eumelanin as a signifier of racial difference. At a molecular level, he suggests, things are never so simple.



Jes Fan: Systems II, 2018, silicone, glass, epoxy, eumelanin, testosterone, estradiol, and wood, 52 by 25 by 20 inches. TAHIR CARL KARMALI

OCULA

### New Museum Triennial Takes a Subtle Turn

By Vivian Chui | New York, 17 November 2021

Much has been said about the biennials, triennials, and large group showings that, like art fairs, have cropped up in cities around the world with seemingly ever-growing frequency. This autumn, there are three such presentations in New York City alone, at MoMA PS1, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the New Museum.

At the latter venue, *Soft Water Hard Stone* (27 October 2021–23 January 2022) offers a thoughtful approach to the well intentioned yet overabundant model of bringing together wide-ranging selections to gauge the current pulse of contemporary art.

The institution's fifth Triennial gathers the creative voices of 40 artists, hailing from 23 countries spread across 6 continents, into a successful showing that fills the entirety of the New Museum's building.

Curators Margot Norton and Jamillah James, alongside curatorial fellows Jeanette Bisschops and Bernardo Mosqueira, have gathered a strikingly cohesive body of works created by individuals each addressing themes and issues as different as their media of choice.

Inspired by a Brazilian proverb that alludes to the possibility of transformation against all odds of impermeability, the exhibition speaks to the cultural, personal, and political shifts that humans both contend with and struggle towards within contemporary society.

Rather than forcing artists into rooms organised by subthemes, works correspond to one another in a free-flowing exchange that runs through the show.

Jes Fan's glass sculptures Networks (for Rupture) and Networks (for Expansion) (both 2021), containing a strain of black mould known for its asexual reproduction, are placed besides Iris Touliatou's Untitled (Still Not Over You) (2021), an abstract installation of flickering, near obsolete fluorescent light tubes collected from defunct offices in Greece.



Jes Fan, Networks (for Rupture) and Networks (for Expansion) (both 2021). Exhibition view: Soft Water Hard Stone, 2021 New Museum Triennial, New Museum, New York (27 October 2021–23 January 2022). Courtesy New Museum. Photo:Dario Lasagni. Although addressing unrelated themes—respectively, sexual identity and the temporality of human infrastructures—the pairing appears materially harmonious, united visually by the shared use of tubular materials.

One of the show's greatest strengths is the notable subtlety of works on display: a refreshing respite at a time when so many artists have embraced brash, overt political agendas within their practices.



Left to right: Jes Fan, Networks (for Rupture) and Networks (for Expansion) (both 2021); Iris Touliatou, Untitled (Still Not Over You) (2021). Exhibition view: Soft Water Hard Stone, 2021 New Museum Triennial, New Museum, New York (27 October 2021–23 January 2022). Courtesy New Museum. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

At one juncture, the question, 'Does the future really have to be this bright?' is posed within the video, causing viewers to wonder whether there can be a possible reality in which humans disrupt the cycles of violence and suppression.

The query feels emblematic of the works presented within Soft Water Hard Stone—an offering of manifold voices that holds a collective mirror against the legacies, traumas, and dangers that those of us living through the 21st century must navigate. —[O]

# artasiapacific |

## CARL CHENG, EVELYN TAOCHENG WANG, AAAJIAO, AKI INOMATA, PAO HOUA HER

ISSUE 124 JUL/AUG 2021



Living in humid environments entails a constant battle with mold. It gets in bookshelves and closets, spoils food, and stains all manner of surfaces. Mold, it would seem, is not our friend.

Jes Fan, however, sees it differently. "Since 2018, I've been thinking about collaborating with different species, especially those we consider as contaminants," the artist explained. From deriving estrogen cream from his mother's urine to injecting glass blobs with melanin and other biochemical substances, Fan's interdisciplinary practice takes a molecular deep dive into the nature of alterity.

During his research into "productive contamination," Fan discovered that black mold is a key source in the production of citric acid and other common preservatives. Commissioned for the 2021 Liverpool Biennial, the artist's sculptural *Network* (For Staying Low to the Ground), Network (For Survival), and Network (For Dispersal) (all 2021) consist of interlinked glass tubes connected to hand-blown, "tumorous" vessels. These serve as incubators for Phycomyces zygospores, a mold with fine dark filaments that evoked for Fan "Asian hair, my hair." The highwaystraight channels, futuristic as they look, have an unexpected organic influence: their sharp right angles mimic the way urban banyan tree roots zig-zag around bricks, one of the ingenious ways nature survives in tropical cityscapes.

Held within these complex conduits, the fungus receptacles threaten to spill and contaminate far and wide. Yet the vessels are disturbing less for their contents than their profound contradiction: they may allude to malignancy and spoilage, but they are also life-giving by design. Amid a pandemic that has been cynically racialized, Fan's installation destabilizes binaries of purity and incursion, confronting how we determine who-or what-is the infectious Other.

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at Liverpool Biennial 2021. Photo by Rob Battersby. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

# JES



Left and right pages: installation views of JES FAN's Network series, 2020-, Phycomyces zygospores, silicone, and borosilicate glass, 83.8×147.3×38cm; 139.7×246.4cm; and 154.9×198.1cm,

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#### ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

Andrew Hunt on the eleventh Liverpool Biennial June 17, 2021



Jes Fan, Form A= Network (For Staying Low to the Ground), 2021, borosilicate glass, silicone, phycomyces zygospore, dimensions variable. Installation view, Lewis's Building, Liverpool. Photo: Rob Battersby.

My own itinerary started at Lewis's, a former department store and classic temporary biennial venue. On the first floor, Camille Henrot's cartoonlike gestural paintings and sculptures, collectively titled Wet Job, 2020–21 and themed around breast pumps, were installed alongside Jes Fan's network of borosilicate glass laboratory pipes and Diego Bianchi's carnivalesque sculptures, made from mixed plastics and found materials to resemble obese figures, all of it scored by Bianchi's eerie audio of bodily functions such as exhaling and snoring. Things intensified upstairs, where Lou Jr-shin's small replica of a nightclub bathroom set the scene for a number of acoustic experiments, and Sohrab Hura showed slow-motion footage of revelers visiting the Indian coastline interspersed with war imagery, all of it backed by a scorching electronic beat.

Over at the city's Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Black Obsidian Sound System's bone-rattlingly loud dark room installation The Only Good System Is a Soundsystem, 2021, could be felt physically, amplifying its message of communal strength. Like Fan's ersatz dancehall loo, the work endeavors to conjure "a clublike space of collective pleasure and healing," unanswerable to institutional norms and governance. Despite the affirmative messaging, there's a touch of melancholy about this effort to reconstruct the ambiance of counterculture in the museum, especially given recent debates around radical collectives' cooption by institutions—this May, B.O.S.S. criticized the "exploitative practices" of the Turner Prize, which nominated them along with four other groups this year.



# 233 HO I JES FAN

**TEXT BY** PAVEL S. PYŚ

In 1986, performance artist Stelarc wrote: "skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality [...] technology has become the body's new membrane of existence."<sup>1</sup> While Stelarc posited on the cybernetic—hybridizing the bodily with the robotic—his assessment shares common ground with the work of New York-based artist Jes Fan, whose works often begin with a contemplation of skin. Drawing on laboratory processes of distillation, extraction, and injection, Fan turns our attention to the skin as a coded boundary that conceals a vast unseen molecular world inextricably linked to our assumptions of identity, race, and gender. Pliable, porous, yet simultaneously presumed to fit rigid normative expectations, skin, in Fan's work, is a contested entry point in a practice that unravels understandings of what constitutes a 'normal,' 'natural,' 'healthy' body.

Though also working with moving image and performance, the core of Fan's practice is sculptural, catalyzed by an enquiry into the social, cultural, and political meanings that have been ascribed to particular substances. Fan has worked with many materials that approximate the body (silicone and 3D printed resin point towards its fleshy interiors, glass globules become stand-ins for organs), but also its excretions (urine), sex hormones (testosterone, estrogen), and pigment (melanin), exploring the gendered and racialized status conferred upon the very stuff that makes up our bodies. The series Systems (2018-ongoing) consists of wooden structures clad with resin, which, once sanded, become similar to skin. Within the lattices, Fan arranges glass objects, each filled with silicone, into which the artist injects melanin, progesterone, estradiol, and depo-testosterone. Systems contrasts opposing forces—hard with soft, the grid with the biomorphic—to short circuit the logic of binary thinking, proposing instead as the title suggests—a new network of rela- foreign)—actually derives from xenophora,

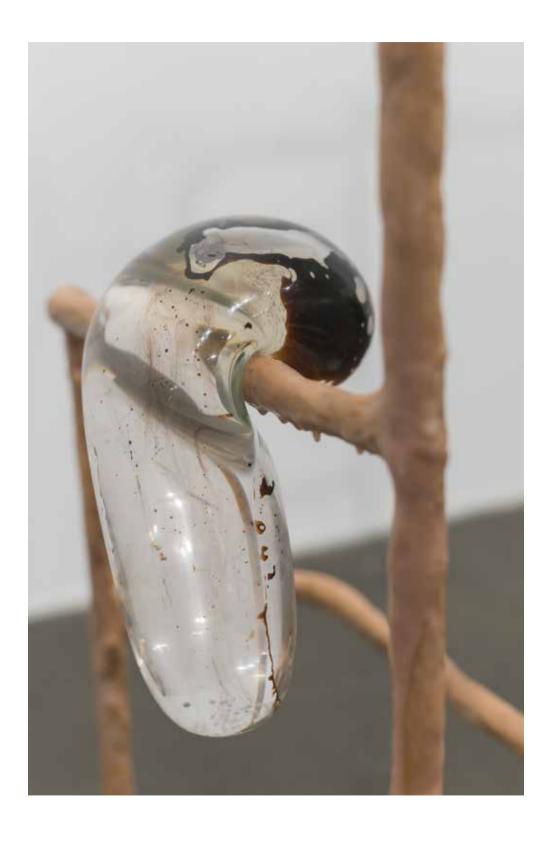
tionships. Speaking of this series, the artist reflected: "holding the hormones in my hands [...] there's some absurdity in it."<sup>2</sup> In isolating these politically charged substances, Systems questions how they become tethered to fixed categories. Contingent and ephemeral, the sculptures emphasize fluidity and malleability. Along with Fan's own life story—as an immigrant, someone queer, having transitionedthe Systems series is a contemplation of identity never monolithic nor solid, but always subject to change.

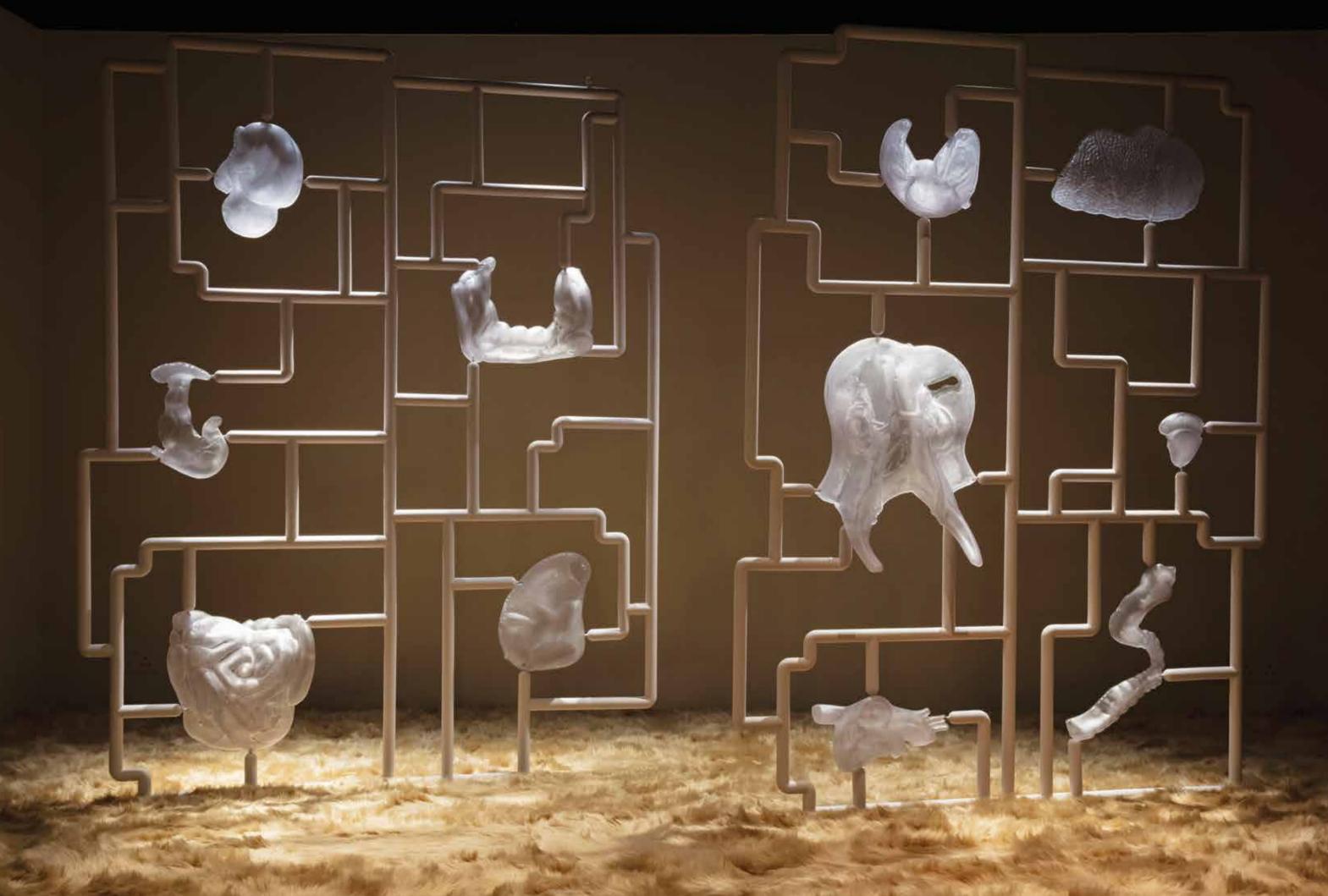
At times, Fan's sculptures accompany moving image works in immersive installations. Part of the 2020 Biennale of Sydney, two multi-tiered sculptures (Form Begets Function and Function Begets Form, both 2020) presented glass blobs filled with estrogen, semen, and blood. Appearing reminiscent of store displays, they were, in fact, inspired by Chinese scholar shelves, which typically house arrangements of collectibles. Standing atop amoebic-shaped pedestals, all of the surfaces are rounded, their sinuous curvatures bringing to mind Tishan Hsu's architectonic paintings or Isamu Noguchi's modular sculptures. Anchoring the room is Xenophoria (2020), a video shot in close-up that would delight any ASMR fan: on petri dishes and metallic laboratory surfaces we see slick liquids bursting from ruptured ink sacs and fungi being scraped. We also find lingering shots of Western-style portraits by the Chinese painter Lam Qua (1801-60), who was commissioned by the American medical missionary Peter Parker (1804-88) to depict patients suffering from various disfigurements, especially tumors. The work pushes the limits of the very absurdity that fascinates Fan: the video documents the artist searching for the manifestations of melanin in the human, animal, and fungal realms. The title—a play upon both 'xenophilia' (love of the foreign) and its inverse 'xenophobia' (prejudice against the

232-233) dd) 2018 ÷ 231) Systems ġ P Pierre 2021 Photo: Diagram IX,









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the name of a sea mollusk species, which attach shells and rocks to their own shells as they comb the sea floor. "I feel akin to this animal,"<sup>3</sup> Fan admitted, and we might wager that the xenophora can be read as a metaphor for Fan's own narrative as an immigrant—born in Canada, raised in Hong Kong, now living and working in the United States.

In his first solo exhibition at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong in 2018. Fan presented Mother is a Woman (all works 2018), a video that began with the artist sourcing a sample of his mother's urine, which he then transported to the United States for processing in a laboratory. From extracted estrogen he produced a beauty cream, named after the work's title. The video—which lightly parodies the format of an advertisement—shows various people applying the lotion to their skin, while a voice intones: "as your skin absorbs my mother's estrogen you are effeminized by her [...] kin is where the mother is." Accompanying the video were a number of sculptural components that extended Fan's concern with gueering our understanding of family ties, gender, maternity, and particularly our skin. Wall-bound Diagram sculptures find their starting point in epidermis illustrations, while Visible Woman shows a lattice not dissimilar to those used in the Systems series, but here covered with 3D printed resin body parts. Like a scaled up punch-out plastic sheet you might find in model toy sets, the installation takes its name from a vintage American 1960s anatomical model. Underscoring the exhibition was also the story of transitioning, suggested via soybeans and casts of yams, which are frequently used as sources for industrially produced sex hormones. In Fan's hands, the body becomes a site of making and unmaking much like an art object; Fan reflected: "using testosterone to masculinize my body is similar to using a chisel to carve out a surface [...] you're sculpting your body, I'm like that glass in this liquid

transformation or perpetually in flux."4

In his fascination with hormones and fluids, Fan's practice finds affinity with artists Candice Lin, Mary Maggic, Patrick Staff, and Anicka Yi, who have each questioned how imperceptible substances come into play in our understandings of one another's bodies and selves. While Fan's work to date has been largely located in a consideration of the gendered and racialized human body, upcoming projects extend these concerns into the animal realm, probing at issues of non-human and non-animal consciousness as well as interspecies relationships. In his new experiments with mold, mollusks, and agarwood—which will premiere at the upcom-

ing 2021 Liverpool Biennial, and 2022 solo exhibitions at The Kitchen, New York, and Empty Gallery. Hong Kong—Fan seeks to upturn our assumptions of contamination and infection. issues especially timely today. Drawing on research into symbiotic relationships as well as parasites, Fan explores how disease can yield objects deemed precious and beautiful (such as pearls or perfume). How might infection be understood as 'productive'? How do we assign the values of a 'positive' or 'negative' relationship when studying the natural realm? Throughout his work. Fan unseats privileged categories, instead seeking new ways to understand the body, race, and sexuality beyond a normative viewpoint. His next chapter of work brings to mind critic Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of "co-activity,"<sup>5</sup> an approach he sees embodied by artists who seek an equivalence between the elemental, mineral, plant, animal, and human in a bid to shatter the subject/object divide and remove the human from the privileged center. Within this world, in which, according to Bourriaud, relationships are "horizontal" rather than "unidirectional,"<sup>6</sup> Fan learns from nature, seeking new dimensions of value and meaning beyond the anthropocentric worldview.

images Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

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 Stelarc, "Beyond the Body: Amplified Body, Laser Eyes, and Third Hand" (1986), reprinted in Kristine Stilles and Peter Howard Selz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 427-430.
 Artist quoted in *Jes Fan in Flux: Art21 "New York Close Up"*, May 15,

2019, available online.3. Artist quoted in Jan Garden Castro, "States of Flux: A Conversation

with Jes Fan," in *Sculpture*, March/April 2020, 63. 4. Artist quoted in *Jes Fan in Flux: Art21 "New York Close Up*", May 15,

4. Artist quoted in Jes Fan in Flux: Art21 "New York Close Up", May 15, 2019, available online.

5. For further context, see Nicolas Bourriaud, "Coactivity: Between Human and Nonhuman," in *Flash Art*, issue 326, June/August 2019. Available online, accessed January 3, 2021.

6. Bourriaud quoted in the lecture *Politics of the Anthropocene. Humans, Things and Reification in Contemporary Art*, delivered at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, May 15, 2015. Available online, accessed January 3, 2021.



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# Art in America

Lorraine O'Grady + George W. Bush's Immigrant Portraits + Laurie Anderson



# God Is the Microsphere

A conversation on the biochemistry of race and gender. Jes Fan with Deboleena Roy



THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MEANINGS we ascribe to biological processes fascinate the sculptor Jes Fan, as they do biologist and feminist scholar Deboleena Roy. Melanin, for instance – the biochemical that creates pigment in skin - can evoke a whole host of assumptions and stereotypes; it drastically affects social identity. Fan, prompting viewers to consider the materiality of race and gender, incorporates biochemicals directly into his sculptures. His work demonstrates how humans can modify the presence of substances like testosterone and estrogen, and highlights the significant but overlooked roles of microbes. Roy, in her book Molecular Feminisms: Biology, Becomings, and Life in the Lab (2018), interrogates the feminist ethics of biological lab work, asking questions like "should feminists clone?" She is also on the editorial board of Catalyst, a journal of feminist science studies, whose Spring 2020 issue featured a cover article on Fan's work. Below, Fan and Roy discuss the possibilities of human collaborations with microscopic species, as well as the gendered and racialized language scientists use to describe microorganisms.

**DEBOLEENA ROY** I was so excited when I first encountered your work as the cover for the *Catalyst* issue on chemical entanglements. I'd love to hear your perspective on the piece we chose, *Systems II*.

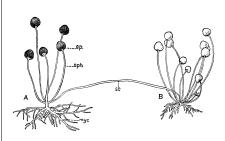
JES FAN [Literary scholar] Rachel Lee wrote so eloquently about my work in "A Lattice of Chemicalized Kinship," her essay for that issue. I made *Systems II* during a residency at Recess Art in Brooklyn. While there, I had a studio visit with a painter, who mentioned that the pigments he uses to mix various skin tones are actually very different from the biochemical processes in our bodies. For instance, painters might use cadmium red to paint skin with pinkish hues. But the colors of our actual flesh are produced via biochemical pigments called melanin: eumelanin is brown or black, and pheomelanin is orange or red.

I began thinking about how artists typically revert to symbols or abstraction as I became more drawn to the literal. So I decided that, rather than represent skin, I'd make melanin: eumelanin in particular. I'm a maker at my core: I have a BFA in glass from RISD. So questions like "how do I make this?" and "what is it made of?" have always driven my practice. When I think about more precarious matters like race and gender – I've worked with testosterone and estrogen as well – those questions become more interesting. In a way, the literal is the ultimate abstraction.

**ROY** That resonates with what I'm doing. My PhD is in molecular biology and reproductive neuroendocrinology. When I first began working with hormones, decades ago, I noticed that we use all these metaphors to describe their actions. One reproductive technologies lab, for instance, was trying to find a way to insert a sperm into an egg using a laser. That way of approaching the process comes from the language we use to describe female gametes versus male gametes.

**FAN** Right, the sperm is referred to as the aggressor attacking the egg. But in actuality, the egg absorbing the sperm is a more applicable metaphor.

ROY And in society, people stereotypically





Top, illustration of bread mold. The connecting line labeled "st" is a stolon. The group of lines labeled "myc" are mycelium.

Above, Jes Fan: Systems II (detail), 2018, composite resin, glass, melanin, estradiol, depo-testosterone, silicone, wood, 52 by 25 by 20 inches. think of the feminine as docile and the masculine as active. . . . So, how did you make the melanin?

FAN I worked with a for-hire lab called Brooklyn Bio. I approached them with my residency budget and told them I wanted to make melanin, then incorporate it into my sculpture. So we genetically modified E. coliand I was adamant about using E. coli instead of the other option, yeast. Living in Hong Kong under British colonial rule, and also living in the US for ten years now, I've observed how racial fear often runs parallel to our fears of microbial contaminations. For instance, one reason why the most expensive real estate in Hong Kong is situated at The Peak is because, during the bubonic plague, the governor reserved residence above a certain altitude for the English. There was a theory that the higher the altitude, the more difficult it would be for germs to travel. And if you look at Jim Crow laws, you again see racial fears running parallel to hygienic fears - especially those around segregating bodies of water.

I made *Systems II* in 2018, and it's interesting to see the observations I made then ring so true today, as the pandemic takes hold of the world. Mid-March, when the lockdowns began in New York, I was actually on a plane! I was flying back from the Sydney Biennial, and some other passengers sprayed hand sanitizer at me and my [Chinese] family...

#### ROY That's awful.

**FAN** I know. . . . As someone who's gone through SARS, I'm very cognizant that one reason why Western scientists did not advocate wearing face masks in the beginning has a lot to do with this often subconscious public imaginary that white bodies are pure, that white bodies are not capable of being contaminants: they can only be *contaminated*.

**ROY** It's a false sense of immunological superiority.

**FAN** Exactly. I wanted *Systems II* to convey the way that we are entangled with one another and with nonhuman beings, like *E. coli.* I give these bacteria credit as the master artists of that work. I've worked as a fabricator for other artists, so I react strongly against the art market's insistence on the notion of the heroic, singular artist. You wrote about something similar in the chapter of *Molecular Feminisms* called "Sex Lives of Bacteria."

**ROY** The question driving me for that chapter was, do bacteria write poetry? And if so, will we ever know? I know the question is really out there. But molecular



Jes Fan: Systems II, 2018, composite resin, glass, melanin, estradiol, depo-testosterone, silicone, wood, 52 by 25 by 20 inches.

biology and biotech places great emphasis on writing, transcription, translation: it's all about taking a portion of the DNA code and re-creating it. That's how we got synthetic biology and CRISPR technologies [for editing genes]. Feminist science studies and New Materialist thinkers have insisted that we should value what bacteria do as writing, on par with what humans do. But my question is, what are they writing?

**FAN** Right. And your point isn't that their content can be deciphered. But if language is the materialization of thought or energy into form. . . . I think bacteria are doing the same thing. I'm a huge advocate of the idea that all matter has life. But that idea also makes me hesitate. When we say all things have life, in a sense, we're diminishing some sectors of human life, such as Black and brown lives in the US right now. I was

arguing with my father about this recently. I told him about New Materialist thinkers who show us how insignificant we are in the world. But he argued, "So what? A rock has no human rights." What do you say to these kinds of rebuttals?

**ROY** You could look at the world through a rights framework: certain people and certain beings get to fit into that framework. I avoid arguing what has rights and what doesn't have rights. I just say, that's not the framework that I'm working with. Rather, I'm trying to think about different types of encounters with beings around me.

For instance, [Indian biologist] Jagadish Chandra Bose did experiments trying to find out whether plants were sentient. When people told him that he should be patenting his work, he said, nature is not for me to patent. Rights, ownership, and



Jes Fan: Testo-Candle, 2017, beeswax, candle wick, depo-testosterone, 4 by 5 by 6 inches. Edition 1 of 3 with 1 AP.



Jes Fan: Mother Is a Woman (still), 2018, color HD video with sound, 4 minutes, 43 seconds.

autonomous agency have historically not been the dominant framework in many places around the world. I'm trying to bring different frameworks into the conversation.

**FAN** I agree with you. In my attempt to grasp sentience beyond humans, I'm not asserting rights or even interested in that framework. For me, it's an exercise of humility, of understanding that we are only a minute component of the world. In many ways, I've found the coronavirus a humbling experience. God is not female. God is not male. God is the microsphere. Humans are going to be brought down by the smallest microbes.

**ROY** So that's *E. coli* in the glass blobs on the sculpture?

**FAN** Yes, I think of the glass shapes as cells. They're slumped over a wood and resin structure modeled on mycelium [the

filament networks found in fungi], and also the stolons [root systems by which one plant – for example, grass – grows out of another, creating a network] that you wrote about. I was looking at plant networks because I wanted to point out the entanglement between us and other species.

I was also thinking about the form of the pedestal. I wanted to move away from the Western idea of propping up an object up at eye level for the ease of the viewer. I wanted to center the object's experience, and think about how the pedestal could actually care for its bottom. When people visit my studio, I encourage them to remove the glass sculptures from their bases and hold them in their hands as a way to truly understand them. Though I have to say that when I show the work in museums, there are all these bureaucratic issues preventing touch, like insurance. Chinese antiquities – especially Scholar Rocks or jade objects that are set on elaborate, ornamental wooden bases – are a huge source of inspiration for me. And I come from a family of manufacturers: my dad ran a toy factory, and my mother and my grandfather ran tapestry factories and made doilies. So I think a lot about touch, and changing the hierarchy of our senses. Touch can be a way of knowing: intelligence isn't expressed only in language.

**ROY** You're talking about glass, and I'm talking about grass! The idea of knowing from below is central to my book. Stolons are smart, and we have a lot to learn from them. To me, that practice of holding the cells is a stolonic practice.

FAN Thank you. I like that reading.

**ROY** You've also worked with hormones, like me!

**FAN** Yes, I first started working with biochemicals because I was, and still am, taking testosterone. Before I made *Systems* II, I made a video called *Mother Is a Woman* (2018). I asked my mother for urine, then extracted estrogen from her pee to create a beauty cream. I wondered, if you were to put on that cream and be feminized by my mother, then what is your relationship with her, and what's my relationship with you?

**ROY** I wonder how many people who take Premarin [an estrogen-based cream] think about their entanglement with horses.

FAN Right, it's made from horse urine! My first experiments with hormones were *Testo-Soap* and *Testo-Candle* [both 2017]. I made them during my residency at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, which has a rich history of engaging with craft. I was thinking about hierarchies that drew craft away from fine art: it's often seen as too pedestrian, too feminine. So I asked myself, what is the craftiest object I can make? And I started making candles and soap, but using testosterone. That project is what led me to ideas about touch, hygiene, and beauty – the way these things are politicized and also gendered. ●

JES FAN is an artist born in Scarborough, Canada; raised in Hong Kong; and based in New York.

DEBOLEENA ROY is senior associate dean at Emory University, where she is also a professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies, and of neuroscience and behavioral biology. X Zhu-Nowell, "A Conversation with Jes Fan, Jota Mombaça, Iki Yos Piña Narváez, and Tuesday Smillie", Guggenheim, 16 - 19 February, 2021

# GUGGENHEIM

#### A Conversation with Jes Fan, Jota Mombaça, Iki Yos Piña Narváez, and Tuesday Smillie

For this four-part series, X Zhu-Nowell, Assistant Curator, invited four artists—Jes Fan, Jota Mombaça, Iki Yos Piña Narváez, and Tuesday Smillie—to participate in a discussion about decoloniality, transfeminism, and what is at stake when discourses about transgender personhood center on white, Western, or cisgender feminist and queer perspectives.

The conversation was conducted via two video calls in fall 2020. Check back throughout the week to read the rest of their conversation.

#### Introductions and "Indefinition"

Jota Mombaça: My name is Jota Mombaça. I was born in Brazil. I now live as a migrant in Fortress Europe, but am moving between different contexts all the time. I'm an artist. I'm also a writer and researcher. I am super interdisciplinary in my practice. I express through different forms and strategies.

I've been interested in and have been doing a lot of decolonial critical work, as well as antiracist critical work. I've also been studying some queer activisms and theories, especially in relation to the question of "queer imperialism," or in other words, why queer isn't a term that works for describing gender nonconforming experiences in Abya Yala and other formerly colonized or non-Anglo contexts.

For the last two or three years I've been dedicating myself to investigating and creating speculative fiction and a certain "futurology," which is actually a radical anticolonial decomposition of linear time and, therefore, the future. So, right now my practice is super based in visionary fiction, discussions on the impossible, and how to make the impossible emerge.

### "queer isn't a term that works for describing gender nonconforming experiences in Abya Yala and other formerly colonized or non-Anglo contexts."

**Tuesday Smillie:** Hello, my name's Tuesday. I use female pronouns. I'm based in New York and born in Boston. I'm a visual artist and work across a couple of different mediums. I've been making large-scale textile collages that are in visual dialogue with protest signage, as well as geometric abstraction, but I also work in drawing, collage, and some printmaking.

I think of my practice as "transfeminist." For me, that really points away from my personal, individual experience. It is much more about charging the viewer with a task: asking the viewer to undertake a loving, but rigorous, critical self-reflection.

**Iki Yos Piña Narváez:** My name is Iki Yos Piña Narváez. I am an Afro-Caribbean, diasporic, trans, nonbinary body. I am a performance artist and a visual artist—a writer too. I am living in Madrid and part of the Ayllu Collective, a collaborative research group engaged with political action. We are migrants, POC, and QPOC. I am researching anticolonial archives and Black radical thought too. I am talking in my work about my own body, in connection with the Black Caribbean. I investigate issues related to the Black memories in the Caribbean zone, as well as anticolonial thought and practices of the Black Caribbean. I have made drawings about Black/brown bodies, Cimarron[\*] bodies from my own experience, and ancestral entities connecting past time, present time, and future. I have developed a series of workshops and activities around anti-Blackness thinking, from popular education and artistic practices.

[\*When I say *Cimarron* (from *cimarrón* and *cimarronaje*), I mean an ancient technology of resistance developed by Black fugitives from the capture process and by Indigenous women.]

Jes Fan: Hi. I am J. And it's such a pleasure to be in the same room with everyone. I'm lucky to have crossed paths with everyone [here] in a physical capacity prior to the shutdown of the world. My primary medium is material. By that I don't only mean materials in a molecular scale, or materials in an actual object-space scale: I'm also invested in the genealogy of materials, where things come from, how they're made, and in extension the meaning that's embedded within their history.

Lately, I'm working a lot with mold and thinking about mold as a source. For example, we think of [mold] as a household contaminant, especially black mold. I'm looking at a strain of mold called *Aspergillus niger*, and this particular mold is actually how citric acid is produced. It's how we preserve most foods, most processed foods.

I look at binaries a lot. When we think about how we have particular associations with materials. Especially and for instance, estrogen with femininity; testosterone, masculinity; and melanin with Blackness. When materials become synonymous with identity, or even a larger idea of contamination, repulsion, or danger, then I'm really interested in just presenting a material in its pure form: "Well, this is the puddle you're asking for. Like, is this what you want?" [Laughs.] So that's mostly what I'm invested in.

X Zhu-Nowell: Thank you so much for the introductions. Like many of you, lately I've been ruminating about positionality and perspective. My perspective, like that of any one person, is limited. I want to begin by reading a quote by Édouard Glissant that I've recently been "obsessed" with: "When you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form." This is a beautifully poetic passage, but it also keeps reminding me of the urgency to check my *place*. To keep one's own position in perspective and to keep one's perspective in position. [Laughs.]

Since this has been on my mind so much lately, I want to start with a question that is usually three separate questions: What's on your mind? How are you feeling? And, where are you? It's conventional to divide the mind and the body when we ask, How are you doing? We can ignore how our bodies are feeling, and solely think with our "mind" in a purely rational way...

**Mombaça:** How am I feeling? Well, with all these things—not being able to get home during the lockdown, and then getting home and having to leave due to institutional forms of xenophobia (which is pretty much something that is present in every migrant's life), the issue of housing and whether to leave or to stay (and that is also a recurrent topic in Glissant, who was super interested in migration, displacement, and global movement)—I am now facing a lot of uncertainty and "indefinition." And of course, it's hard. And it creates a lot of anxiety, which is this emotional attempt to anticipate the future without having the tools for doing that

But at the same time, it's making me think a lot on this dimension of uncertainty and indefinition as also a force that we need to be able to live with, and grow with, and be accompanied by. So when I talk about anxiety, of course I'm talking about my body, and how my body sleeps, and how my body wakes up, and how my body feels in the streets, for instance. But I am also trying to talk on learning and creating modes of staying with uncertainty and indefinition also as forces that can provide me with possibilities that I cannot foresee.

I believe that the forces of indefinition and uncertainty are constantly updating themselves. As they are always in this updating process, they are also updating our possibilities in their movement. Although it's crossed by structural forms of brutality, structural forms of violence, there is also a certain aspect of potency or force that can also provide us with an entry point to the impossible. Which is pretty much what I'm rooting for and trying to dream of. In a certain way, I'm trying to call out and root for that thing that lies in uncertainty, and that can surprise me, and then surprise us, collectively.

Of course, I'm speaking from my position and from my perspective, but I also believe that it has a collective dimension. I mean, this relation with uncertainty can also provide us with a collective process of world building. Any world-building process needs to make room for uncertainty—not just as something that [propels] us to imagine, but as the condition for our imagination to escape the limits of what the world has presented as possible.

Zhu-Nowell: Thank you, Jota. So, we will stay with the uncertainty for this duration of the conversation.



Fan: I mean, on the note of uncertainty, I had a similar story [to Jota's] when I flew from Sydney to Adelaide.... The WHO [World Health Organization] declared that the virus is a pandemic, and then I arrived, and the talk got canceled. I was supposed to fly to Hong Kong for Basel, but then it got canceled, too, so I flew back to New York. And that night when I arrived, my apartment building had a fire. [Laughs.] I had to scrounge around and be asking people who lived in my neighborhood, "Hey, can I crash?" And then I ultimately crashed at my roommate's boyfriend's place. Later [in May], my roommate's boyfriend wanted to move in and asked me to move out of the apartment. So, I left. And then my... studio program ended. And I had to move my studio.

Ultimately, amid all of this geographical instability and uncertainty about the future, I did something that was crazy. I pulled out everything from my archive. Like, everything that I've ever accumulated in my stay in America for the past ten years. I organized everything and started putting things into place. But the mess lingered for a month. And I got sober in that month. It was such—so many things, and... so much mess. And I realized it is, in a way, an allegory of the state we are at and the disorganization that's happening, it's just us yanking out all the dirt. Like, we're just trying to put things back into an organized state, I hope.

**Narváez:** It's so difficult, this time. So hard. But I think I was living this time in the past—'cause I feel like if my body was living with this time at another time, I am escaping. Cimarron people every time we are escaping. I am running right now. I am a migrant in Spain. Like aliens, my regulation [immigration status] is a work in progress.

Black and brown people are always perceived as strange. I feel like I'm running in this world. I feel tired. But always Black people run. Indigenous people escape to live. I am alive, but I am fighting against social death. I am fighting against white supremacy too. I am tired. But I am alive. So this is important: 'cause when I say "I'm alive," I think about the future. I feel at this moment a collective rage. But at the same time, I decided to live. 'Cause when we say, "Black lives matter, Black trans lives matter, Indigenous lives matter," we want to fight, we want to live here.

At the same time, I think there [is], like, the spirit of death. It's a pandemic time. We can think about this. What does pandemic time mean? What does it mean to say "I am alive"? What's the meaning when I say [that]? There is a spirit of death in the atmosphere. The white and colonial pandemic always existed. Post-pandemic time doesn't exist because we live in this anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-trans world. This is the pandemic world. I'm thinking about the future too. I'm thinking about that. I am traveling the past and living in the present but thinking about the future. This is my mood. When I speak of an atmosphere of death, I am also speaking of the dead and the entities that accompany us in another temporality that were also massacred by the pandemic of white supremacy. So, it is these deaths, and our ancestors, that also give us support to live.



X Zhu-Nowell: I want to zoom in on the idea of "future." Just thinking about the temporality of future in a linear way... perhaps we should think differently.

Many of us inherited an understanding of history that was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment project, which necessitated that progress is perfectly linear and that there was a rational, evolutionary course of world history. With this acknowledgement, it can be difficult to grapple with neoliberal calls for "progress"—or, marching forward toward a particular goal or outcome. From your own positionalities, positions, perspectives; how are you dealing with the idea of futurity, the future, or futures?

Jes Fan: When one says "I am alive," I hear the word am in relation to the word alive. I think in English we forget that am is a verb. We use [it] as an absolute, but forget that am is just another form of are or is. It is always continual. It's always in plural.

Building the present is also building future, you know? Investing in our present is always investing in our future. That's why I stopped using social media—I completely stopped. I think it was doing something really harmful to how I feel things. I can't be scrolling through a story of a friend celebrating her career success, liking it, and then another story of someone losing their close friend, and then someone I don't know being killed by police. That kind of recurring, never-ending... it creates a callus on one's empathy. It creates a callus on how one is able to be present, and not preoccupied by other forms of intake of information. So, I stopped that and I've never been so optimistic. I think I've been able to mentally pull through this pandemic mostly because I stopped using social media and spending time on my phone, especially interacting with that form of information uptake. That permanent scrolling. I've become a happier person. I've become a more optimistic person, because I'm present. I am present. I am alive.

**Zhu-Nowell:** In earnest, in my job and this field, I find myself constantly engaging with people and programs that employ "the future" as an outlet for "radical imagination." From your point, J, those that are always living in the future, or continuously talking and theorizing about it, might not also be "present." Perhaps that's a gap we're observing; the gap between the so-conceived future and the present is something quite interesting.

Fan: I'm sorry, I'm nodding so hard to when you say "radical imagination." It's 'cause I'm gonna reveal how much of an etymology nerd I am. Radical comes from the word root. That's the etymology of the word. That's where the word radical comes from. And actually, whenever a curator talks about radical imagination, I'm like, this was just history that wasn't taught to us. This kind of world order that we call radical imagination—ancient history's been doing it. It's not that radical. Unless you're talking about radical as the root, you know?

Jota Mombaça: It's interesting what you brought up, J, about the etymology of radical being related to the root and how this challenges the compulsory relation between forms of radical imagination and the realms of the future. I think that's precisely why we are talking about undoing the linear time while we are talking about the future. This way, we allow "What if?" questions to take place. Or, as Saidiya Hartman poses, the question becomes "What could have been?" instead of "What actually has happened?"

A radical imaginative process goes on when one looks into historical regimes of brutality. For instance, when one asks, "What could have been of those dreams, if they weren't brutalized?" It opens up a field for an exercise of the imagination that somehow might produce futures without being locked down in time linearity. And now I remembered—probably Iki would be able to talk better about that than me—but I know that for certain Indigenous cosmologies from Abya Yala, the future is behind us.

I believe that this shifting of perspective can also help us to discuss the future without enabling the imperative of "progress." That way we can also take certain erratic, messy forms of producing "better" futures into consideration. In this sense, planning is not a rational, realistic activity, but a speculative one. Because if we try to be realistic all the time, it will ultimately prevent us from moving across the brutal realities we are conditioned to. So, while I believe it's fundamental for us to confront brutality, to confront violence, to confront the actual modes [of] how society organizes violence, I also believe that we need to allow our imagination to go toward what's not imaginable within such framework—in other words, to make a move toward the impossible.

## "We're walking with the past in the front. For me, it's important... for thinking about the future not like progress. Thinking about that future, traveling to the past."

I also believe that provides for us a very interesting definition of the future, as that which is already and yet to come. And how can we vibrate along with these things that are already and yet to come? And some of them are also dead, in a certain way. Or they have crossed that. They are informed by that. I was listening to Iki's affirmation, "I am alive," and at the same time, "But I am facing social death." And I was thinking on the way this affirmation, "I am alive," when made by some of our bodies, can always already imply another way of thinking about death as well. Another way of understanding death and living with it. Because we need to deal with it. Because our communities are constantly facing death. I'm thinking about Brazil, for instance, and the recurrence of trans and Black death. But the US is no different, of course.

So we need, as an ethical mandate, to be able to affirm that we are alive without just missing the fact that we are also dead, to a certain extent. Or that there is something they are trying to kill on us when they kill a sister.

I just wanted to finish this commentary with something that I've been obsessed with, which is an interview by Octavia Butler [for] some sort of science fiction TV show from the '90s, probably. She had just launched The Parable of the Sower. So the journalist asks her about the future, and she says something like, "The '60s are the decade of the attempt of coming together. The '90s is the decade of disintegration. The 2020s, I call it 'the burn.'"

And here I cannot forget that by the end of last year, the Amazon was burning, and it still is in so many ways. The same in the Brazilian Pantanal. By the beginning of this year, Australia was burning. Congo was burning. Even Greenland has burned. And so, when Iki said, "I feel that I was already living in this time," I feel the power of this affirmation, because it affirms the fact that we live in different temporalities at once. We can... access different temporalities at once. And when I heard Octavia Butler talking about the 2020s as "the burn," and then when I read the Parable series, which is about a time called the Pox, which is precisely happening in this decade, I am not just talking about premonition as, like, foreseeing the future, but as a reading of the present, a reading of the forces in the present.

**Iki Yos Piña Narváez:** Thank you, Jota, for these words. It's powerful, too, because it's a hard time for Black trans bodies, trans lives. I remember this Indigenous quote, "walking with the past in front of us," from Abya Yala. Yuderkys Espinosa—she is Afrofeminist—said the future is past and the future has been. It's an interpretation of this quote. We're walking with the past in the front. For me, it's important, this quote, for thinking about the future not like progress. Thinking about that future, traveling to the past.

And, when I think about the future, I think about my ancestral body. My body in the cosmology of the ancestors. The body in relation with the sea, with the sun, with the rainbow. It's another kind of body, with the residues of rocks, salt, and the residues of time. The white people can't understand it. And for me it's important. I am a Cimarron body, Afro-descendant, and our body, our existence, is outside the binary [of] human and culture—beyond the human and the concept of nature created by white supremacy. I think it's obvious, it's important to think about our body without biology, without medicine, without anthropology. I think [of] our body outside of the human body. I think our body is underlying—nonbeing. I think [of] our body living in social death. I think when I'm talking about the underlying, the underlying of humanity is the metaphysical world. It is the ancestral world. It is the ancestral time too.

**Tuesday Smillie:** I'm thinking about your previous comment, X, about a curatorial focus, a curatorial question around radical imagination. With left-leaning curators, and I think more broadly with the left, there is anxiety about not being able to imagine the future, not being able to imagine transforming the present—wanting things to be different but not knowing what that tangibly looks like. And there is this vacuum, a void of alternative models for social and governmental ways of being in the world. This past year has offered a brilliant, heartbreaking example of how extractive capitalism is destroying the world that we live on and reduces human life to [the] inconsequential and disposable. It is depressing, looking around and finding few substantive alternatives.

But actually, there have been lots of experiments into other governmental and socially structured ways of being, and they've been brutally suppressed, largely by the US. Across South and Central America, in parts of Africa, in parts of Asia, there have been large-scale movements attempting to organize government and social life differently. But these experiments were brutally repressed.

Living inside the singular narrative of this moment is stifling. It's claustrophobic and horrific. We are surrounded by horrors, social death, ecocide, the death of the planet. This is a catch-22 of capitalism: we are told that this is the only thing we as humans know how to do, but actually human cultures have taken many different forms. We can organize ourselves differently. For artists, this idea of radical imagination, I think we can play a part in that. We're part of building a collective consciousness and a remembering of other possibilities.

Jota, I really love the way you talk about leaning into the uncertainty, the unknown. Any kind of imagining that we can construct in this moment will inevitably be laced with the toxins of this moment. We have to be embracing that in trying to imagine another world. We're going to re-create or rearticulate some of the systems we live in now, and we have to confront that as it happens. We get to keep confronting them. It isn't a one-shot deal, where we flip a switch and then we're done. But we get to embrace the beauty of the unknown, that there are other ways of being we can't see right now, ways of being that have been buried in our past, ignored by a linear mapping of histories. This is the place where I can find optimism, despite the horrors that we are immersed in.

#### **Ancestral Bodies**

X Zhu-Nowell: What Tuesday said [in part two] reminds me of a prior conversation I had with Jota. Do you remember talking about the utilization of radical imaginations to think about futures with me? These tasks are often imposed upon minorities, people of color, trans people, and queers. The labor and involvement of different individuals is presented in a way that appears inclusive, but at the same time, it limits possibility. It frames, but in doing so also limits, what we're allowed to imagine. This is a strange mode of play that sets out to dismantle hierarchies. [It] says, "Go ahead, imagine." Yet it simultaneously sets the parameters for participation.

Jes Fan: I don't think there could be radicality if we're not starting from the root up. And not just from the people, but from the material and how we compose knowledge. And if you think about using this more rhizomatic approach to the word radicality—like, actually entanglement and thinking even in the root network in trees—you know, actually, they rely on an interspecies kinship. Mycelium networks, fungal networks in the soil, actually store excess dioxide from older trees. When healthy trees sense younger trees or trees in struggle, they rely on the mycelium network to actually transport nutrients to younger or trees that are suffering. That's a form of radicality. That's a form of radicality that I think a lot of human communities have trouble imitating.... I mean, it's so trendy to talk about, like, interspecies kinship now. And I do think there is a lot of knowledge and wisdom we can learn through not just looking at our own network but more toward other forms of knowledge-building and community-building in other species.

Jota Mombaça: I was thinking about this: the trendiness of radical imagination, and interspecies, and things like this in relation to what Tuesday was saying about the way these other possible forms of being together and organizing societies were either suppressed or entirely captured by capitalistic, ever-evolving logics of control. I was thinking about how [to] navigate a system that is constantly trying to capture this discussion that we cannot really stop making because, in a certain way, our lives depend on it. Because we are talking about something that is completely related with the ways of working together and living together and moving on across these apocalyptic times.

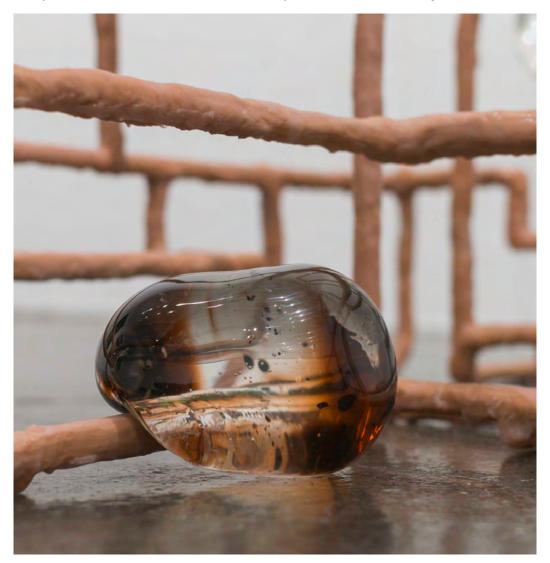
If institutions keep capturing these things and transforming them into trends, what does it mean? It means that we will be disposed of when it stops being the trend. So how can we keep doing this work, In spite of these attempts? [How can we] negotiate or deal with the complexities of these attempts of capturing or erasing? I feel that when we are creating and engaging in this discussion, we are also creating a space for the secrets of the things that are present here, that are vibrating along with us. But they cannot be expressed in a transparent manner. Or they cannot simply become a project—I mean, these other worlds we might live in, they cannot be a project of this world.

I was also thinking that when we refuse to provide the project of what these other worlds might be, we also connect with a dimension of transition, which is something constantly forgotten. I remember the work of a brilliant Mexican artist called Lia Garcia (aka Lia La Novia) and the idea of collective transition she works with. Few years ago, I saw a lecture of hers in Vienna. She was showing works on transness made by some European trans artists, and they were super focused on the body, on the body's changing. And then she showed her work, which is, like, public parties, public celebrations of her transition. She plays with some images of Mexican womanhood, like the quinceañera or la novia. And then the parties, and the collective moments they unfold, become the images of her transition.

And rather than focusing on what will be, on what could be—a world that is just; a world that is good; a world that works for us all; a world that is not racist; a world that takes into account, as J was talking, the entanglement with all the living forms that vibrate and exist here; a world that takes into account what Iki was saying about ancestry and the ancestral body—instead of trying to project, maybe we could focus on making the transition. Because it's something that we are quite good at. We've been doing that in spite of the world's attempt of stopping us to do that.

#### "If institutions keep capturing these things and transforming them into trends, what does it mean? It means that we will be disposed of when it stops being the trend."

**Zhu-Nowell:** I like your idea of capturing and erasing, and having to implicitly deal with these trends. This dynamic continually produces erasure, especially when new identity-based terms are rolled out in institutional contexts. Take, for example, popular survey exhibitions like Kiss My Genders, which can be contextualized in ways that run the risk of erasing all that came before.



Fan: Right, that's what I'm saying! It should be radical histories instead of radical futures.

My favorite writer lately, Ocean Vuong, said something like, "Some say history is linear, it goes from one point to another. But we should think about history more as a spiral. It expands from one rendition of itself to another rendition." And I think we are just in the process of that. He also said that in America we teach our children "the future's in your hands," but in fact [we] should be say, "The future is in your mouth." Because you need to be able to articulate what you want to be, what you want to see, before you can actually make it happen. Without the ability to articulate that imagination, it's impossible to actually visualize it. Because language is just essentially materialized thought.

Zhu-Nowell: Jota, in our recent studio visit, we were chatting about how a lot of your work is ritualistic or enacts a certain kind of... not a sigil—what is it, those magical words? A chant? An incantation? It's an act that realizes a creative expression through embodied experience, with some performative aspects. It's not something that requires or needs to be written down. Instead of a pure, cognitive exercise, it's intimately related to the body, if that makes sense.

**Mombaça:** Yeah, I think it relates a lot with the idea of the ancestral body Iki was talking about. Also this thing of need[ing] to be able to articulate that. But we also need to be able to, like, "I don't have a word for that." And for me, that's the point. Also, because I don't speak English all the time, but I guess even in Portuguese, I don't think I have a word for that.

Zhu-Nowell: The limitations of language are very important to think through.

**Mombaça:** Yeah, that's the thing we need to do in order to make this articulation, which is not only rational—that's something that keeps coming back to me 'cause I work a lot with words and text. Yet this dimension of not being able to say, it's so important for me. It's as important as the opportunity to write about something. At least, in my practice, 'cause it's also about—and I get back to Glissant—opacity, which is this thing that is not just opaque to the other but opaque for oneself. And that's something you need to be able to live with, and breathe with, and grow with. And I think it's also an interesting form of understanding how we might create something. Because there is no universal, the expressions are also local. They are also ephemeral in a certain way. I guess what I'm trying to say is that my practice is also about breathing with that thing you can't grasp. Something like this... I don't know.

Iki Yos Piña Narváez: It's important, when we're talking about the words and worlds—I can't find the words sometimes. When speaking, I can't find the words in my mind. And when I write, I can't find the words. And then I am a cartoonist, a drawer. I am drawing the future sometimes. Radical future. When I can't find the word, I'm drawing. This is important, 'cause it's another kind of language too. And when I'm talking about my ancestral body, I'm drawing on our collective ancestral body. Because when I'm talking about my ancestral body, I didn't read about this. 'Cause it's oral culture, and it's impossible to find a book that was talking about ancestral body.

It's important to talk with your grandma, with your mother, to know these stories. I think—so when I draw, and when I think about oral culture, I am producing futures too. I am producing a way to escape. And producing different branches to escape. Escape way of life.

Saidiya Hartman wrote in "Venus in Two Acts," "What is required to imagine a free state or to tell an impossible story, critical fabulation is a way to escape, to escape a little space, to create another world too." And then it's important, to talk with your community, talk with your family. 'Cause the future is here, but it's there too. I mean, it's important to dream and make a connection with your gods—with Oxalá, for example, in a dream, to find ways. For when I dream, I escape too.

**Zhu-Nowell:** Those are beautiful words, which remind me of how you've spoken about drawing as a different medium of communication. It reminded me of the media philosophy of Sybille Krämer and how she theorizes English or other Anglophone languages as being notations of spoken language. However, the Chinese language is the opposite: it was a visual language first. It was a xiangxing wenzi, which means, like, "a picture type of language"?

Even within the language systems, there's so much variation already. And on top of that, there are drawings and all kinds of strategies that put forth different kinds of communication.

#### I Think My Body Is a Coin

X Zhu-Nowell: I want to start by asking Jota about what it means to think with uncertainty. We've discussed this before and how it relates to ideas of transition and the phenomenon of uncertainty. I'm understanding "transition" broadly here—whether it's from a mushroom, you know, morphing to a different type of mushroom, or a seed to a plant. Or, the metamorphosis of an idea as it manifests in different contexts and times. All this diversity of transitioning also comes with uncertainty.

So, I would love to hear more from your perspective about how you see uncertainty and transition informing your practice. Do you think of these concepts as metaphors? Or, is it more heuristic—something that can help you think through or discover something for yourself?

Jota Mombaça: I know there's something about my practice that sometimes makes me feel really uncomfortable when I need to talk about that, which is precisely this openness, or unfinished dimension. I think it's not a bad thing. We talked about that in that conversation we had, X, about how uncomfortable, or how one might feel when need to explain something that is, by definition, still forming, and yet to be. So I believe that my work has this relation with uncertainty and with transition in the sense that I constantly see my practice as something that is still unfolding.

But I also think that uncertainty comes with tension, which is not to say that there is not force and potency there. There is. But it always comes with this level of... sacrifice. Well, I am not trying to portray my trajectory or any trajectory into the art world as heroic. I don't believe in such a thing. But, I mean, you pay a price. Some of us need to pay a price. And this price comes with uncertainty and replicates uncertainty in our paths. So, for me, at the moment, my practice is not just related to what I do as an artist, but with the fact that I somehow managed to become an artist. And right now this articulation is throwing me into a huge crisis, because I feel that I spent the last seven years trying to make people accept the fact that I have something to say and I have something to show.

So right now I am so crossed by the effects of this journey. I am really feeling, right now, the necessity of taking up my practice toward a different direction, which is not the direction of having to convince people, or show people, or... I don't know... I don't know if this was what you were expecting me to answer. I don't know if I would answer that last week, for instance, during the other call we had. But right now I feel so crossed by this price I had to pay, and that I still have to pay, just to be here that I could not think about uncertainty without bringing it up.

And then this idea of transition—it began to be part of my work precisely from the moment I started to work with speculative fiction. I mean, of course, the idea of transition is part of my life. But it became something that I wanted to work on after I decided that I would not try to write or create utopias, or work on the topic of utopian possibilities. I would rather work on the transition. I would rather try to understand how to transition, how to transition toward the unknown, but an unknown that somehow can release us from several of the constraints we are tied to right now. So I believe my work with visionary fiction, speculative fiction, both in writing and in my visual work, it's super related with this idea of transition, of constantly creating the conditions for an always ongoing collective transition, as Lia Garcia's work provokes us to think.

I think that's the place where I've been able to experiment. Here I think about this text by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown in a book they organized a few years ago called Octavia's Brood. There they present the political possibility of science fiction and fantastic forms of creation as a place where we can experiment with less risks on things that we could eventually do together, in terms of transforming the world. And I think this idea of experiment with less risk caught me because that's the possibility I'm trying to find, one that counteracts the imposition of risk as the measure for Black, trans lives.

I want to be able to create and to exercise my creative force without having to succumb to that risk. Succumb to that abyss that surrounds my life at this very moment, which is not poethical (although it engages poethically with my practice) but political in the sense that it relates with existing social structures of reproduction of death and risk. So I put a lot of faith in this work, as I've learned to put a lot of faith in the uncertainty. Because I cannot count with what I have, what I can see. I cannot count on that. I cannot. So I put a lot of faith in the uncertainty, and I put a lot of faith in the transition, as forces that might show us possibilities that we can't even imagine right now. And I think my work is interested in that, although sometimes it's not expressed there formally. I don't know.

#### "as much as I would like to think about what trans- means, I really would rather think about what cis- means... If this were a more common practice, perhaps the burden of articulating difference wouldn't fall upon trans people."

Zhu-Nowell: Thank you so much, Jota. That was beautifully put and very thought-provoking.

I agree with you about continually having to prove that we're even worth being here. Also, how this contingent dynamic to power forces us to continually articulate our differences, which itself is a form of violence.

It's important to think about this situation and how it informs present understandings of concepts like "transition." Ideas can't really be defined in absence of the world. They're never entirely innocent of their historically conditioned features. Tuesday, I know much of your work with text, signage, and the banners touches upon this in some ways.

**Tuesday Smillie**: I think the transition is not only in the work but also in where and how artwork gets seen and engaged with. X and Jota, you were talking about this need to constantly prove that you are worth being here, that you deserve to be in arts spaces, which makes me think of Chaédria LaBouvier's experience working with the Guggenheim last year. Iki and Jota, LaBouvier was a guest curator who put together a show looking at [Jean-Michel] Basquiat's depiction and engagement of police within his paintings and centered around an artwork that commemorated Michael Stewart, a Black artist in the [1980s] East Village scene who was killed by police after being arrested for graffiti. While LaBouvier was preparing this beautiful, incisive show, she was also live tweeting her own experiences of racism and disrespect happening at the museum. These kinds of experiences unfortunately, aren't limited to the Guggenheim. The Whitney has ongoing issues with basic competency around racialized issues. The New Museum is trying to union-bust their new union. For socially engaged artists, and for artist thinking about the institution as a container, as a contextualization for their work, these are complicated questions. So right, hashtag "museums are not neutral" [laughs]. But this is the thing about being in transition. There is no settled or resolved space. We have to make our way with the contradictions.

**Tuesday Smillie:** A lot of my artworks revolve around this question, too: how do we trouble our way through? Though the artworks are really addressed to imagined viewers, the tone is different than if I were engaging an institution. These systems of power that we all have been steeped-in are going to rearticulate themselves, even as we attempt to live new ways of being. We have to be brave enough to allow ourselves to imagine, and we also have to be brave enough to be accountable when we rearticulate systems of power, when we hurt each other. It is challenging work to do.

With many of my works, I am asking viewers to sincerely consider their positions within systems of power. That could be hierarchal power imbalance, and it could be a horizontal leveraging of power. We are all situated in complex landscapes, occupying various social locations. But to be honest and sincere with ourselves about the ways that we leverage power, the ways that we benefit from power, and the ways that we are hurt—to be sincere and do the work of investigating on a personal, internal level—this is a powerful place for instigating or activating cultural change. Because the works make this demand, because they ask for an intensive process, I want them to be visually generous. I want them to entice the viewer, to be an enticement and a reward.

I want the viewer to be pulled in enough, by the intrigue of color and composition and texture and material, so that they are already in this world when they arrive at a prompt to consider their relationship to power and within—so that there is already a level of familiarity, a level of trust even, with the object. There is a real polarization of political debate, here in the US. There is a binary to politics and to protest. A framing of, "Are you with us or against us? Am I with you or against you?" I'm interested in the contemplative and vulnerable space of the gallery as a place that could invite a more complex conversation than I think can happen in really charged spaces of political debate. I am trying to make room for a more complex conversation to happen.

I've been thinking about this framing of a "transfeminist politic." I really resist defining transfeminism. There is a really obsessive, consuming, and dehumanizing relationship to transness in the West. This happens in the medical industry, and it also happens socially, in the media, and politically. In the US, we had this—what were they calling it, the "Trans Wave" or something? When [Caitlyn] Jenner came out? Or, "Trans Breaking Point"? And we know that this was a media trend. With all of this attention spotlighting a very wealthy, white trans woman, while trans women of color are being killed in their homes and out on the street, there is a real question about who this representation is actually serving.

The last thing I want transfeminism to do is to define what transness is. I'm interested in an openness, an indefinability—an uncertainty, to use Jota's word—that resists a "categorizational" fixation on bodies and behaviors. I'm also really interested in this question about how we actually prioritize those who are most vulnerable to state and social violence. I am deeply invested in trans peoples' access to health care, to housing, and education, and work, but also to joy, and brilliance, and love. At its crux, I think of transfeminism as really being about prioritizing the lives and voices of those most vulnerable to state and social violence. Here, Jota's idea of leaning into, of being in the transition, is really powerful. We are living this moment that is unsustainable in so many ways. How do we transform this moment into a structure where we are all accounted for, cared for, and allowed to shine?

**Zhu-Nowell:** Thank you. Your words also serve as a PSA that everyone is transitioning in some way. No one is always in a fixed situation, right? I mean, as much as I would like to think about what trans- means, I really [laughs] would rather think about what cis- means.

There are little to no opportunities for individuals to confront, question, interrogate their cis-ness. If this were a more common practice, perhaps the burden of articulating difference wouldn't fall upon trans people.

I love the idea of finding space to build these complex conversations. It's easy to flatten and simplify these deeply intertwined and complicated issues. Flattening makes it easier for them to become slogans. Even though there is power to the slogan, there is the flattening on the flip side.

#### Smillie: Absolutely.

**Iki Yos Piña Narváez:** Thank you, Jota. Thank you, Tuesday Smillie. When they talk, I think about the transition, and think about the colonization, and how our body is put in a big jail. 'Cause the transition in Europe, in [the] West, is like a jail, I think transition has no rules. I seek to escape from the transition rules of Europe and the West too. For this reason, I make an ancestral connection with my body. And our collective, Ayllu Collective, every time [we] think about how our bodies are in connection with the past, how my body is in connection with my gods, with my spirituality. 'Cause I think in this moment, when I think about my body, it's an impossible thing, when I think about my god, my religion, my spirituality. And then every time I think in an art space, I think my body is a coin, you know? Black body is a coin. I don't feel that, but the world thinks that now.

When I think about my transition, I think... my transition is to write. My transition is to draw other shapes—with my family, with my community, with my migrant community, with my queer POC family. I think [of] coloniality [as] a project [to] build a binary system, like a big prison. And when we meet, or hang out with my family, or with my queer POC family, I think that we broke out of this prison, 'cause we make a space for our healing, a space of connection... with our spirituality, collective spirituality. I think that's really important: to make a collective body, to make a collective ancestral body.

Zhu-Nowell: Oh my god, I love that: "make a collective ancestral body."

Narváez: Yeah... I don't know. I think, though, the coloniality is a big trap. The ocularcentrism is a big trap too.

#### Zhu-Nowell: Yes, yes.

**Narváez:** The dimorphism is a trap. The binary system is a trap. I don't know if transfeminism is a trap too. I think about that, 'cause the feminists right now think about the binary system too. And transfeminism is a modern category too. And then, I don't know... I think about the transfeminists right now, thinking that maybe it's a trap too.

**Zhu-Nowell:** I agree. I think so much of our thinking is trapped with language. Western languages significantly can limit ways of thinking about the self. It's a bit of a trap.

I mean, in the West, queer theory and trans studies comes right out of dialectic practices informed by Western traditions of rhetoric and writing down history.

However, as a bilingual person, I often find myself without the words to express what I mean. Sometimes I don't have the language, or I don't recognize the tools needed to have a particular kind of conversation. This situation is also a transition process [laughs], because you're making these approximately similar ideas, but none of them is actually equal.

In every context like this, it's rebuilding the language differently. Do you feel similarly using Spanish and English?

I am very curious to hear more about language and what it means to think about the collective ancestral body as a project. What are the strategies and tactics? [Laughs.] I'm not sure why I'm using all these military terms all of a sudden. I mean, what are other ways to think about these collective ancestral bodies?

Narváez: Yeah. I don't know the specific answer. But from my experience, I feel that in not-mixed spaces, I mean—spaces with queer POC only—[we] make a connection with this body, with this history. And [we] share our knowledge, and share our spirituality, and find a way, or a branch, to escape the rules of transition—medical transition, like [as the] only way. I respect the people that use medical transition. But at the same time, we can use other ways. Maybe if we make a collective ancestral body [of] queer POC, maybe we can find ways. I think it's always complex, 'cause [in] these spaces, there are many forms of violence too. Safe space doesn't exist, 'cause the bodies are different, our histories are different, with different privileges, etcetera.

But I think this isn't new. There are ancestral tools [from] quilombos, cumbes, palenques, rochelas. It's a kind of space to heal and escape. Maybe this is a way.

For example, we are here. We share our knowledge. We share our spirituality, our energy. And maybe we can find a way to heal or to escape. Because my ancestors [and] your ancestors may be guiding us to escape, you know? I think, though, that it is possible to build a collective ancestral body.

Jes Fan: I'm gonna actually piggyback on Iki's talk about the ancestral body, the collective ancestral body. When I was thinking through what you shared, I was thinking, Could the collective ancestral body be actually the microsphere? Could it not just be human? I feel like . . . the virus is really teaching us that none of us are in charge. It is powerful to know that we exist in collective and in an entanglement with one another. But I want to also propose that that other is not necessarily just another human that existed before us but also microbes within the human, and then also the microbes that carried [on] after [the] decay of the human and become trees or... the land. And how we're all so interconnected. And the virus, it really just highlights every point of contact is a possibility for intimate affective exchange, if not lethal.

When we talk about the collective, I think it's really important to have it not just be nonhuman.... One person's writing that I've been really interested [in] is actually Deboleena Roy. She talks a lot about this idea: What does it mean for us to actually... anthropomorphize nonhuman carriers, such as E. coli, in the lab—like, breed it exclusively for the reading and writing for variation of genomic scripts? What does it mean to actually anthropomorphize that?

And there are so many underlying feminisms—like, there's transfeminism, there's technofeminism. And, you know, I love that this word can just be hyphenated in any expense. I kind of love that. Like, chameleon it could be. And the reason why I'm bringing this up is because in our previous talk, I kind of talked about how I'm obsessed with etymology. I think it actually is in parallel with my own work, because I'm always researching how are things made. How can I make that? What is it made out of? And the same is with language.

And when you [suggested] we should think about the word cis, I actually looked it up on my phone. And cis—actually, cisgender—wasn't used until 2011. It's a really new word. And then I think about the limitations of language.... We can hyphenate *transfeminism*. We can hyphenate technofeminism, or actually invent a new word of it under the context of using alphabets.

But what if it's in the language of something like Chinese, [in which] you can't invent a new word under the computer-input technology, right? In Chinese, to actually write in script.... Like ta, in speaking, it's the same word for all genders. It's ta—and also for animals. But then [in] writing, the differentiation occurs—the pronoun for animals actually comes [from] the side of a cow, the character of the cow. And then for men, it's the character of the person. And then for woman, it's the for the character of a female. So... there's been people [who've] been doing a lot of hard work of translating queer terminologies into Chinese writing.



J: But with the computer-input method, you can't really invent a new character. You can invent in conjunction, or directly phonetically translate from English. Like, queer is translated into ku er, which means "cool kid." But then in its own linguistic significance, that actually doesn't carry a meaning in the word itself. Does that make sense?

So I'm simultaneously pointing out these limitations of creating new landscapes by way of this imagination that's textual and verbal... especially [amid] the cold war that's happening between two of the world's biggest powers, right? Like, within the techno space—within TikTok and Instagram, you know? Like, [with the] VPN wall, there is literally a wall, right?

And so there's a word now that's invented. It's only in [hand]written script: replacing the side of the character ta with an X. So it's a really beautiful writing. But it's impossible to circulate it in the [same way as] Latinx, for example. That can be typed out within the hardware we're provided on our keyboard, right? But—and then so maybe I'm really jumping away from X's question [laughs]—but there's just something there I wanted to talk about. While we're trying to reimagine a new landscape within the language construct we have, we also have to think about the hardware we're provided in order to circulate these kinds of imaginations.

**Mombaça:** When we began talking about language, I was remembering something that also kind of relates with the proposal J just did, for us to move beyond the anthropocentric approach when articulating the possibility of this collective ancestral body. Recently I've been reading the entire Xenogenesis series by Octavia Butler again. And there is a part in the second book, Adulthood Rites, in which the Oankali form of communication is described in detail. And it seems to happen "without language," or better, without written and spoken language. By physically pressuring certain points in one another's bodies, they share colors and sensations and forms of information that do not depend on a fixed code. And that reminds me of something that I've been trying to experiment with, which is the possibility of collective sensing.

"every time I think in an art space, I think my body is a coin, you know? Black body is a coin. I don't feel that, but the world thinks that now."

Fan: Jota, I really remember this performance you did at this insane mansion... Iki, were you there? You were there. Jota, it was a phenomenal performance.

I have to describe this mansion to you. We all got driven, or delivered, in the company of this biennial staff into this... Australian bluechip-gallery collector's mansion, where your car would stop at the—like, not even the front gate—like [this] walkway through a mini forest into their garden that outlooks into the bay. Like, this unlimited horizon with a tiny beach on the side. And then there's this gold-crested ceiling in their castle.

And the whole time it was very uncomfortable there, because... So, I was drinking a lot—that was before I got sober. But it was incredibly uncomfortable being there because you're supposed to socialize with these white folks that, you know, probably, this is the most amount of queer and trans and people of color [they've had] in their space. And you can tell that they're uneasy. And then you're uneasy. And then you're supposed to enjoy yourselves with the luxury, right? And... entering their space, Jota just did this performance of looking out to the sea and just, like, reading—or were you reading?—or just going like, "We will eat all your food. We will infiltrate your bloodline." [Everyone laughs.] And there was no food left by the end of the night. It was true. There was no food left at all. [Laughs.]

Mombaça: They were giving us, like, egg sandwiches. And I was, like, "Come on. You stole so much."

Fan: I know, you know? So much.

Mombaça: "You are giving fucking egg sandwiches. Okay?"

Fan: Yeah, but you were obviously also addressing the sea. You weren't addressing them. Like, that's what I love about that. But I just remember being back in the gallery [with] their gold-crested ceiling just listening. And then, like, hearing these people next to me in their suits just being uncomfortable. Everyone's like, "Oh, what's happening?" And I love that moment, because you weren't even addressing them. But the microphone was just so loud they were, you know... I think it also speaks to what you were talking about in these interspecial... like, the sea was who you were addressing. I might have documentation of it, actually.

Zhu-Nowell: That sounds amazing. I can't believe I missed out on that.

Smillie: Wow, I would love to see that documentation!

Fan: I love that. "We will eat all of your food and infiltrate your bloodline." [Laughs.] They were all, like, shuddering.

https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/a-conversation-with-jes-fan-jota-mombaca-iki-yos-pina-narvaez-and-tuesday-smillie-part-4 © 2021 THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION

https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/conversation-with-fan-mombaca-narvaez-smillie-part-2

https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/conversation-with-fan-mombaca-narvaez-smillie-part-3

## DAPPER DAN Isue 22

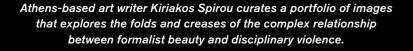


## **Formidable Grace**

Artworks by

Francesco Arena, Vasilis Botoulas, Fahd Burki, Lygia Clark, Jes Fan, Stelios Kallinikou, Maria Koshenkova, Richard Long, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, Julius-C Schreiner, Sergey Skip.

Curated by Kiriakos Spirou



Elegance and intellectual prowess manifest more Formidable Grace is an essay of sorts or the curakind. However, to achieve the level of accurapline is required.

bonsai branch or working on one's cou-de-pied. There is a violence in rendering the body in metal, binding the body for pleasure, living and working in a world defined by modernity. At the same time, a graceful resistance rises to counter that force: a tender petal for every bound branch, a breaking of the rules for every structure of power.

clearly in formalism, especially of the abstract torial notes of an exhibition that never happened. It is an edited, annotated folio of collected images cy and effortlessness required for formalism to that reveal in different ways the violence hidden achieve its deep aesthetic impact, austere disci- in graceful and beautiful things-and conversely, the beauty that seeks to justify violent actions. My There is a violence in that subtle bend of a research has taken me through various examples of this antagonistic relationship, from repetitive visual gestures to bondage, the manipulation of public space, nationalist art and intimate, queer world-building.



Jes Fan's fleshy sculptures often take the form of grids that occupy space as self-standing systems. In the work pictured here, the stratified grid develops vertically, and flowing glass objects are hanging from it as if dripping downwards. Larger glass blobs are situated near the base of the sculpture as if holding it in place.

Jes Fan, System II, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

Sophie X. Guo, "(Dis)Embodying the biomolecular sex: The lapse of identity in Jes Fan's hormone works (2017-2018)", The Courtauld's Gender & Sexuality Research Group, 03 Dec 2020

# **The Courtauld**

To borrow the terms of the American feminist Donna J. Haraway, the twenty-first-century body is a technoliving system, the result of an irreversible implosion of modern binaries (female/male, animal/ human, nature/culture).

### — Paul. B. Preciado, 2013<sup>[1]</sup>

The contemporary condition of the body as a 'technoliving system' is meticulously mapped onto Jes Fan's precarious sculptures, through which the artist wishes to challenge binary conceptions of gender, race, and identity. In their 2018 sculptural series titled *Systems*, Fan isolates testosterone, estrogen and melanin from the human body and lets them float freely in their hand-blown glass globules. Rendered in biomorphic shapes recalling human organs and drops of body fluids, the limpid glass objects slothfully hang on a piping system which the artist called 'lattice', as if in the process of leaking, or seeping out (Fig. 1).<sup>[2]</sup> Not dissimilar to lattice normally used as a support for climbing plants, the vine-like pipeline used in Fan's works is, for them, a 'living shelf'— or at least, a semi-living one, for the sex hormones and melanin contained in the glass vessels are perpetually in flux.<sup>[3]</sup>



Figure. 1: Jes Fan. Systems II. 2018. Composite Resin, Glass, Melanin, Estradiol, Depo-Testosterone, Silicone, Wood. © Jes Fan.

The material process of glass comes in a state of flux too. Glass as a material gains liquidity when it is heated and is malleable because it is able to store the heat for a while. The beginning of the documentary film *Jes Fan* in Flux (2019) shows an alchemical process of glass-making: glass comes out of the kiln in the form of a hot bubble, and the artist blows it on plaster that bears the imprint of the body part of their friend.<sup>[4]</sup> To Fan, glass blowing is 'a huge Venn diagram for [their] obsession with vessels and containers.' <sup>[5]</sup> Glass does not function as a means to an end in Fan's work, but with its pliable materiality and processes serves as a metaphor for a constant state of transitioning, which is intimately linked not only to the artist's own migration between different geographical and cultural loci, but also to their experience of transformation in gender and sex.<sup>[6]</sup> Stereotypical misconceptions about gender as a social identity often claim it is solely or largely the product of hormones.<sup>[7]</sup> But while hormones may have historically informed interpretations of gender; gender itself is not fixed, static, or ahistorical, nor limited to the bodies that contain it. Fan's glass capsules contain and thus isolate the hormones from the context of the human body, delinking them from any norms or images associated with the masculine or the feminine. In other words, testosterone and estrogen are 'prevented' from getting translated as images of masculinity or femininity. Therefore, Fan's deployment of hormones as a material does not confirm the essentialist view that hormones necessarily 'produce' gender, but on the contrary, encourages us to examine the significance of these politically contested materials that are normally invisible to the human eye.

Further than that, male and female sex hormones often co-exist in Fan's work. In *Systems III* (2018), the artist incorporates large pieces of resin sanded to 'skin-like smoothness', revealing patches of different colours found on human skins.<sup>[8]</sup> A glass globule containing progesterone penetrates the resin plane like a drop of serum traveling through the pore of the skin into the endocrinological system of the body, while an orb holding a small amount of testosterone is already there resting upon the vein-like lattice (Fig. 3). Suggestive of the body systems that are porous and malleable, *Systems III* seems in congruence with the non-binary line of thought, which holds that the body consists of 'a complicated array of masculine and feminine characteristics'<sup>[9]</sup> and is able to produce both androgens and estrogens under certain conditions and circumstances.<sup>[10]</sup>



Figure. 2: Jes Fan. Animacy Arrangement-Cube. 2017. Capsules, soybeans and water. © Jes Fan.

By visualising the hormones in a quantified manner, Fan also demonstrates how the body is reconfigured in a molecular and informational terms entangled in what Paul B. Preciado calls 'the condition of life in the pharmacopornographic era.'<sup>[11]</sup> 'Pharmacopornographic' is a term that refers to the government of sexual subjectivity through 'biomolecular (pharmaco)' and 'semiotic-technical (pornographic)' processes.<sup>[12]</sup> That sexualities are measured in biomolecular, tangible terms characterises the pharmacopornographic biocapitalism. Having the experience of transitioning themselves, Fan is fully aware of this regime. They were intrigued by the idea that masculinity came as a bottle of testosterone tagged with a price.<sup>[13]</sup> They did a systematic research into how steroid hormones were pharmaceutically produced and discovered that both testosterone and estrogen available for sale on the market came from soybean phytosterols. <sup>[14]</sup> This finding that an androgynous identity symbolically inhabits a soybean leads to their installation work *Animacy Arrangement* (2017), for which the artist packed soybeans into capsules and organised them into a cube structure (Fig. 2).



Figure. 3: Jes Fan. Systems III. 2018. Composite Resin, Glass, Melanin, Progesterone, Testosterone, Silicone, Wood. © Jes Fan.

Although the artist identifies as trans, they are skeptical of any normative representations and acts that demarcate what alternative genders is supposed to look like. Over the course of their transition, Fan has learned codes and norms associated with masculinity that were unfamiliar to them, and at the same time, unlearned what they had been taught previously.<sup>[15]</sup> Only at later time they realised the performative nature of these acts, and decided to 'unlearn what [they] took from the lessons of trying to attain machismo.'<sup>[16]</sup> The process of unlearning is for them 'not always comfortable.'<sup>[17]</sup> It might be this discomfort that sharpened the artist's awareness of the surface of their body, because, as Sara Ahmed poignantly points out, the inability to inhabit the norms (surface as the social skin) produces a feeling of estrangement and disorientation that will generate an awareness acute as such.<sup>[18]</sup> Skin is indeed very present in Fan's work. From *Diagram I-V* and *Systems III* to their four-minute, forty-four-second video work *Mother is a Woman* (2018), Fan reflects on the epidermis as a site of identification, a vessel of othering and queer feeling.



Figure. 4: Jes Fan. Mother is a Woman (still). 2018. Colour video. 4 minutes 44 seconds. © Jes Fan and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.



Figure. 5: Jes Fan. Mother is a Woman (still). 2018. Colour video. 4 minutes 44 seconds. © Jes Fan and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

'Mother is a Woman' is eponymously the name of a custom beauty cream, the essence of which is extracted from urine of the artist's mother (Fig. 4). The film begins with a close-up shot of the cream contained in a test tube followed by the detailed procedure of extracting estrogen from the mother's urine in a laboratory setting. The video switches between scenes that show the 'artisanal' process of extraction and close-ups of men and women actors of different colours rubbing the estrogen cream onto their cheeks (Fig. 5). In the meantime, a female voiceover narrates in first person:

Beyond a beauty cream, *Mother Is a Woman* invites you to rethink kinship through the pores of your skin. Can our epidermis be the first contact of kinship? As your skin absorbs my mother's estrogen, you are feminised by her. *Mother is a Woman* asks, 'Who are you to her?' And, 'Who are you to me?'<sup>[19]</sup>

The work not only gently challenges conventional and stereotypical representations of gender that underlie commercial beauty advertisement, but also proposes the possibility of queer kinship—of 'creating intimacies that are not based on biological ties.'[20] Through an elder Asian woman's urine, the queer subject finds the pleasure of opening up to other bodies via contacts on the skin. They build up a social bonding, or in Fan's terms, 'an entanglement' which may effectively help them accommodate the sense of discomfort with normative ways of living. <sup>(1)</sup> Paul B. Preciado, Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era. Trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 44.

<sup>[2]</sup> Jes Fan, 'Jes Fan in Flux', 15 May 2019, https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/jes-fan-in-flux/ (accessed 15 June 2020).

<sup>[3]</sup> Jes Fan, 'Infectious Beauty', 20 May 2020, https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/jes-fan-infectious-beauty/ (accessed 15 June 2020).

<sup>[4]</sup> Jan Garden Castro, 'States of Flux: A Conversation with Jens Fan', in Sculpture, 15 April 2020, https://sculpturemagazine.art/states-of-flux-a-conversation-with-jes-fan/ (accessed 22 August 2020).

<sup>[5]</sup> Castro, 2020.

<sup>[6]</sup> Fan, 2019.

<sup>[7]</sup> For instance, neuroscientist Joe Herbert believes that testosterone fuels male competition and makes them enjoy taking risks. See Herbert, Testosterone: Sex, Power, and the Will to Win (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>[8]</sup> Glenn Adamson, 'Jes Fan makes work free of gender binaries', 30 August 2018, https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/ stories/jes-fan-makes-work-free-gender-binaries (accessed 15 July 2020).

<sup>(9)</sup>Cordelia Fine quotes D. Joel in Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 225.

<sup>[10]</sup> Fine, 228.

<sup>[11]</sup> Preciado, 28-50.

<sup>[12]</sup> Preciado, 33-34.

<sup>[13]</sup> When they first started transitioning, they bought a bottle of testosterone that cost \$3 with their healthcare. See Melissa Saenz Gordon, 'In the Studio'. April 2019. https://art21.org/read/in-the-studio-jes-fan/ (accessed 15 June 2019).

<sup>[14]</sup> Jan Garden Castro, 'Jes Fan in their Studio: The Miracle of Gender', in Sculpture, 4 January 2017, https://blog. sculpture.org/2017/01/04/jes-fan-in-their-studio-the-miracle-of-gender/ (accessed 23 August 2020). <sup>[15]</sup> Fan. 2019.

<sup>[16]</sup> Castro, 2020.

<sup>[17]</sup> Fan, 2019.

<sup>[18]</sup>Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 145-148.

<sup>[19]</sup> Jes Fan, Mother is a Woman, 2018, 4:44, HD, video, colour. https://vimeo.com/263716151.

<sup>[20]</sup> Ahmed, 154.



## From Tesla cars to Brazilian waxes, being smooth is everything in today's world – but why, artist wonders

- 'Why are we thinking about beauty without edges?' asks artist Jes Fan. His works' rounded edges and fluid forms hide unexpected materials like blood and urine
- A trans male who recalls a 'draconian' education at Diocesan Girls' School in Hong Kong, Fan's art also questions the construction of race and gender identities

## Aaina Bhargava



Jes Fan's "Function begets Form" on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Photo: Zan Wimberley/courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Artist Jes Fan is fascinated by the beautiful and the repulsive. His exploration of the contrast between them leads him to question our standards of beauty, shaped as they are by consumerism.

"In the age of Teslas and Brazilian waxes, everything has to be smooth and [without corners]. Beyond feminine beauty, in architecture you see highly digitally rendered curvature," he says.

"Why are we thinking about beauty without edges? It stoops to consumerist needs, it's a very accessible idea of beauty."

Fan finds beauty in the grotesque. The rounded edges, glossy surfaces and fluid forms that constitute Fan's visually seductive aesthetic disguise the most unexpected materials.



Jes Fan at an exhibition of artworks "Form begets Function", "Xenophoria" (rear), and "Function begets Form", commissioned for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Photo: Ken Leanfore, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Urine, melanin, and blood are suspended within what look like blown glass orbs in both Form Begets Function and Function Begets Form. The works were commissioned for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, which opened in June this year and runs until September.

Sex hormones are captured in similar glass orbs – progesterone in Systems III (2018), and testosterone coupled with beeswax solidified in the form of an unassuming candle in Testo-Candle (2016), works that broach the idea of gender without stigma.

### "When you're growing up, society is your school and vice versa. Hong Kong doesn't always embrace alternatives or people who don't fall under the norm Jes Fan

Fan's work also addresses our construction of identities based on race and gender. Coming from a family in manufacturing – his father ran a toy factory and his grandparents a textile factory in Hong Kong – he has always been interested in how things are made, and this curiosity extends to how social and cultural norms are formed.

The artist says his practice is charged by three questions: "How are things made? What are things made of? And how can we make them better?"

"How is my gender made, how is my race made? How is kinship made? That's what really pushes me," says Fan of his motivations. These themes come together in Mother is a Woman (2018), a video Fan made that presents itself as an advert selling a face cream.



A still from Jes Fan's Mother Is A Woman.

The cream is shown being developed in a lab, where a monotonous voice-over begins with the words: "Mother is a woman, beyond a beauty cream." The contents of the cream include secretions of the hormone oestrogen from Fan's mother.

The narration continues, mimicking the tone of typical skincare marketing highlighting the exclusive and exotic ingredients and method used in creating the product. "We use artisanal technology to extract the purest oestrogen from my mother's urine ... as your skin absorbs my mother's oestrogen you are effeminised by her.

"Mother is a woman who can be applied however you want, daily, weekly, whenever you miss home. Kin is where the mother is."



Detail from Jes Fan's work "Function begets Form". Photo: Zan Wimberley/ courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

Works by Fan are currently on display at X Museum in Beijing, and the artist will be exhibited next year at the Liverpool Biennale in the UK, the Kathmandu Triennale in Nepal, and the Shanghai Biennale in China. Born in Canada but now based in Brooklyn, New York, Fan says the experience of growing up as a queer child in Hong Kong, being trans male, and transitioning from being part of an ethnic majority to a minority in the United States, punctuates his work.

"It has a lot to do with being in the queer community and seeing the world as a gendered place, through a gendered lens," Fan says. "When you're growing up, society is your school and vice versa. Hong Kong doesn't always embrace alternatives or people who don't fall under the norm."



Jes Fan's 2018 work "Systems III". Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

While Fan concedes that "the oppression that happens [in Hong Kong] is less intense or direct [than elsewhere]", he still "felt a lot of pressure being 'smoothed out'. And I didn't grow up seeing queer icons or adults".

Fan attended Diocesan Girls' School, where the education was "draconian and colonial" and made a stronger imprint on him than society or his family.

He later attended Li Po Chun United World College in Hong Kong, after which he went to the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. His approach to making art has been influenced by all three institutions.

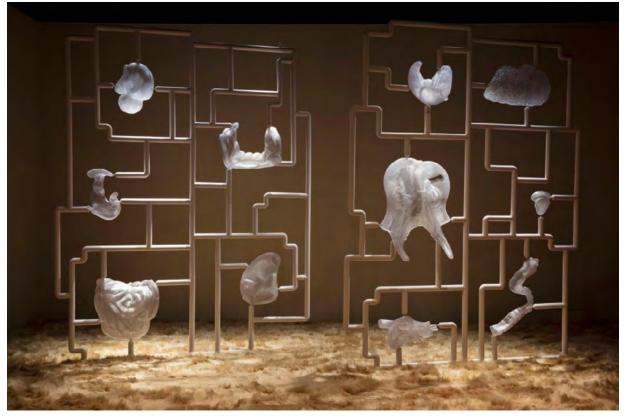
"I think in the very beginning, I was working so hard ultimately to prove other people wrong, to prove that I was talented and that I had ideas to contribute and I wanted to make meaningful work," Fan says. Since then, his approach and his work have both evolved.

"Right now I feel like I'm over that reactive phase. How can I offer my perspective on the world in a non-reactive way? I think this lockdown during Covid-19 has been especially sobering and allowed me to reflect on that," says Fan.

> https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3099350/tesla-cars-brazilian-waxes-being-smooth-everything-todays

# Living 42 Content

Jes Fan



Visible Woman, 2018 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Michael Yu

Jes Fan sees his practice functioning as a language: materials and processes create meaning, colors and shapes act like grammar, and certain paradoxes are to be celebrated as metaphors. His work is often about finding the finest balance between beauty and the abject, collapsing the boundaries between subject and object, figuration and abstraction. We first met in his studio in Dumbo, New York, where he showed me what he was working on, and a few months later we caught up over the phone for this interview for Living Content. We talked about what American identity politics means for his practice, about the chauvinism of the art world, about books that have been an inspiration to him, and – in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic – about slowing down and learning to live better.

Adriana Blidaru: You were born in Canada, moved to Hong Kong, and now you live in New York. Finding out this, made me curious about your trajectory: how and where did you find art along the way?

Jes Fan: I grew up in Hong Kong but like a lot of folks from my generation from Hong Kong, I was born abroad. My parents emigrated to Canada before I was born because of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. They were hoping to have a safer future, but my dad didn't speak English so it was difficult for him to navigate sustaining a family there. He decided to move back to Hong Kong and my mother followed soon after. So I didn't really spend my most formative years in Canada, but I'm fortunate enough to have a dual citizenship which is always a good backup plan in cases like fascism rising in one country or the other.

I think that as someone whose work is situated in a state of flux, being geographically buoyant and not claiming one home or one specific culture, is really important for me. I get invited to a lot of Asian-American shows but I'm not American, and I actually am fairly public that I am not American. The lapse of who I'm being read as and who I actually am is very substantial. Just because I don't have a perceived Chinese accent, everyone assumes I'm American.

But, not to diverge too much, I started thinking that I'm an artist because I noticed that I am the best to myself and to other people when I'm making art. I had a gut feeling that that's what I needed to do since I was very young.

AB: Your work is very sensual: it has smooth and soft surfaces, shiny translucent elements (such as handblown glass, silicone etc.), and it often plays on symmetry.

There are certain associations at play, upon which humans have constructed and developed further ideas of "beauty" or "well-being". So just by looking at your work certain hard-wired feelings are triggered. The same goes for your adaptations of the ASMR genre: when listening to ASMR an instant relaxation occurs for most people. Can you tell me more about how you build in these "attractors" in your work?

JF: Yeah, I love this question because it's so observative. I approach my art-making as a language: thinking about how color can act like grammar, with each indentation suggesting a pause in your eye, and in your trajectory of looking. For instance, I love juxtaposing things that are slippery and soft with something very angular. It's a game of seduction in a way: I want to pull you into these beautiful things but, at the same time, these beautiful things hold inside abject materials such as melanin generated from Ecoli, semen, blood, and so on. These are the things that will make you pause because you're not just confronted by beauty (or what we consider beauty), you're confronted by the sublime of it. So, the beauty in my work is hand-in-hand with the grotesque.

Nowadays, beauty can be as flat as a double-tap Like button. Have you ever read "Saving Beauty" by Byung-Chul Han? He's a German philosopher and he talks about the flatness of beauty these days: how slickness is the texture of our current cultural psyche. He raises questions about what it means to live in the age of Brazilian waxed bodies and Teslas, where there are no pores, where everything looks rendered and smooth.

There's something commanding in that visual language but then also confronting that smooth slick techno curvatures with something really kind of raw. What concerns me ultimately is how I can use materials and processes, in a way that incite meaning – not just using materials as a means to an end.

AB: Right. The hand-blown glass sculptures that you inject with organic substances are perfect illustrations of this point. When we last saw each other in your studio you were saying that you'd like for folks to be able to hold and touch your sculptures. Is that something that you're still thinking about? And is it feasible in exhibitions?

JF: Yes, Absolutely. That's something that I would want people to do, but it's been more and more difficult with the bureaucracy and the insurance involved. I think that there's definitely something magical about holding them. I don't know if I told you about my favorite metaphor of what my art aspires to do? It's like seeing a lemon laying around and feeling the sourness of the lemon in your jaw without actually eating the lemon. What's behind the process of just seeing the object, have it trigger a memory of your previous consumption, and then having a completely reflexive response? So yes, ultimately, there is a desire to have an environment where people can hold with intention, but with the current logistical reasons in exhibitions, it's proving very difficult for me to actualize that.

Maybe someday in the future, that will happen, but as of right now, I'm exploring the right triggers to create reflexive responses.

AB: Returning to the idea of beauty: you often point to stories that happen on a molecular level. Here, boundaries operate by completely different laws, and perhaps beauty – as we understand it, through our human perspective – is not even that relevant anymore. Can you tell me more about your perspective and interest in scale?

JF: The molecular is actually the most literal and figural presentation of the ultimate matter we are, and yet, paradoxically, it's so abstract. There's something in that tension that I really enjoy exploring. And that's also something that we find in the context of art history, where we talk about abstraction.

Even thinking about the use of the word "figurative": "figuratively speaking" is the complete opposite of what a figure is supposed "to hold" as meaning. The figurative is the opposite of the actual. I think there's something of this scale shifting there that I'm also very attracted to.

Paul Preciado's "Learning From the Virus" has been pretty informative and insightful in thinking about this too. Especially in thinking about how our skin is the "new frontier"; how the new national border is our own body. This is the last armor that "protects" us from the outside and from "the other". And I cannot think about Ahmaud Arbery's murder, and about the fact that, in certain cases, skin signifies danger, signifies war.

AB: I see. For me, looking at the human from a "molecular" point of view could also be a great equalizer that points to universal human nature. You mentioned in other conversations that you don't want your practice to be interpreted as being about your identity but, at the same time, a lot of it draws from your biography. Is there a demarcation line that you specifically want to draw with identity politics when it comes to your work?

JF: I'm not as suspicious of this identity politics movement, as I am of the signifiers of identity. More specifically, the kind of slippages and the not very available spaces carved within American identity politics, where if one is perceived as such then one becomes such. I have some reservations about that.

By needing to hyphenate my role as an artist, I am first put into a circle that allows people to quickly associate me with other signifiers, to define me by what that category means.

Why don't we consider the biography of Donald Judd as being a cis white male, plus, an engineer in the army? Why doesn't that background come in, to explain his love for a 90 degree angle and white cubes? I find these questions more productive!

I think my work is about identity, more so about the lapse between the vessel and the interior, and the mistranslation or the kind of crossing between them.

AB: Talking about the future: I know you had a few projects that you were working on before the world paused because of the virus. I remember from our studio visit that you were preparing "Form Begets Function" for the Biennale of Sydney, which already opened in March, another commission for the Liverpool Biennale, and you also have Shanghai Biennial in China and Kathmandu Triennale in Nepal, lined up for the Fall and Winter of 2020. It's an interesting position for an artist to start off with so many biennials: I'd be curious to know what you like and what you don't like about this way of making and presenting work?

JF: I'm really lucky to have had these opportunities, especially as someone who didn't really follow the current art world dynamics of getting an MFA right after the BFA. I'm really grateful for that, but I was very close to burning out not that long ago. I was talking about this with a friend: the art world is very chauvinistic. Take Eva Hesse for instance: she is such an icon because she died for her art. But we shouldn't put more energy into romanticizing that.

I think that this moment is for us all to think about sustainability, not just in terms of our careers, but also in terms of health and enjoyment. This lockdown might be a pivot: learning through this process to know how to spend time really slowly.

AB: I agree. And this connects to what you were saying earlier: you have to feel good, in order to truly have a meaningful contribution, right?

JF: Right! And to constantly be asking questions! I don't just ask "what will I be making?" but also "why am I making it?", "what are the motives behind this?". If the motive is not there, is it still worth it? These are the questions that I'm always guided by.

AB: So what have you been reading lately that really challenged or surprised you? Something that you'd recommend further?

JF: Definitely Paul B. Preciado's article in Artforum, Byung Chul Han's "Saving Beauty", Anna Tsing's "The Mushroom at the End of the World"; Kyla Schuller's "Biopolitics of Feelings" and "Cultural Politics of Emotions" by Sara Ahmed.





Form Begets Function, 2020 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Lance Brewer



Form Begets Function, 2020 Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with assistance from Canada Council for the Arts and the Consulate General of Canada in Sydney. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photograph: Ken Leanfore, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.



Xenophoria, 2020 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.



*System III*, 2018 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong



*Mother Is A Woman (still)*, 2018 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong







*System I*, 2018 Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong



## Emerging Chinese contemporary artists the focus of X Museum, new Beijing museum whose millennial founders want to change perceptions

- Museum's inaugural exhibition sets out to explore the millennial zeitgeist and will feature artists including Miao Ying, Cui Jie and Jes Fan - A new award to be announced at the show's opening will go to the artist who best defines the future of Chinese contemporary art

Aaina Bhargava 30 May, 2020

Whether state-owned or private, new museums spring up in China all the time – there are, according to the country's National Cultural Heritage Administration, currently more than 5,100 of them across the country.

X Museum in Beijing, though, stands out for being one founded by a pair of millennials: 26-year-old Michael Xufu Huang and former classmate Teresa Tse, who is a year younger. The museum's opening on Saturday comes at a time when the art scene in Beijing is only just beginning to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

X Museum's inaugural exhibition, "X Museum Triennial – How Do We Begin?", sets out to explore the millennial zeitgeist, or "spirit of the age", and is intended to be the first in a series of three-year reviews of Chinese contemporary art.

The show runs until September 13 and features 33 artists, all Chinese or of Chinese descent and all under the age of 40. The roster includes mainland Chinese artists Miao Ying, Cui Jie and Cheng Ran and Hong Kong artists (or those with strong links to the city) including Lee Lee Chan, Mak Ying Tung 2, Xiaoshi Vivian Vivian Qin and Jes Fan.

One of the main themes running through their art is how digitisation has changed our lives and the ways we consume and produce information.



Site of Cleavage (2019) by Jes Fan. Photo: Jes Fan and Empty Gallery

"X Virtual Museum is not just an online copy of the physical museum, nor is it a simple documentation and archive of exhibitions and events that happened in the museum," says Poppy Dongxue Wu, chief curator of X Museum. "It's an extension of the physical space and museum programmes. The idea is to disrupt and intervene in the way people use museum [websites] today."



## Infection and intolerance: Xenophobic imaginings in the art of Jes Fan May 04, 2020

JES FAN WITH HIS INSTALLATION FOR 'NIRIN', THE 22ND BIENNALE OF SYDNEY AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEM-PORARY ART AUSTRALIA (MCA), SYDNEY, 2020; IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE MCA, SYDNEY; © THE ARTIST; PHOTO: KEN LEANFORE

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Australian Government embarked on a number of anti-Chinese and anti-immigration policies. The nation was pathologised and its white, pure, uncontaminated body was at threat from invasive diseases from the unknown East. But with the rise of social constructivist theories regarding race, it seemed that identity was no longer determined by biological essentialism. This year, however, COVID-19 has engendered the rise of Sinophobic attacks as the virus has become racialised.

Jes Fan's installation as part of this year's Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (while temporarily closed) is a reminder that the western world's contemporary fear of contamination and infection is intertwined with centuries of fears of penetration – metastasised and manifested in the biological.

Two of his sculptures, Form begets Function and Function begets Form (both 2020), see glass globules hanging precariously off corners or delicately balancing off thin rails of wooden structures, creating a sense of anxiety. Meanwhile, the sculpture bases are reminiscent of a liquid spill leaking onto the floor, evoking the fear that accompanies what cannot be controlled or contained. The glass parts have been injected with urine, testosterone, estrogen, blood, semen and melanin. Fan recognises that these fluids are highly political, including melanin which is the primary determinant of skin colour and which, in turn, is used to construct racial categories.

Indeed, Fan's investigation of the group of natural pigments is extended and developed in the single-channel video Xenophoria (2020), which is projected onto the entirety of the back wall of the gallery and documents the search for and extraction of melanin. Close-up and microscopic shots reveal the dissection of squids, with their ink sacs being emptied, along with fungi being scraped by a scalpel. Most significantly, these shots of scientific experiments in the laboratory are interspersed with close-ups of medical paintings by Lam Qua (1801 – 1860), who was one of the first Chinese artists to be displayed in Europe and North America. From the 1830s, Qua was commissioned to paint portraits of patients at a Canton hospital depicting their distorted bodies. The first images received of the Chinese by the Chinese in the West portrayed malformed disfigured individuals with bulbous tumours.

The inclusion of these art-historical referents exposes the precedents of racism and the historical narrative of disease associated with Asia. COVID-19 and its societal responses draw on deeply rooted anxieties and a distrust that is embedded in the molecular.



## **Infectious Beauty**

Jes Fan

New York Close Up May 20, 2020



What is beauty in the age of the double tap? In a visual era dominated by the shiny, happy aesthetic of social media, artist Jes Fan walks the fine line between the beautiful and the grotesque, creating sculptures which simultaneously attract and repulse with their glossy finishes, near-erotic shapes, and use of contested biological materials like testosterone and melanin. Fascinated by the mechanisms that construct our cultural conceptions of race and gender, Fan's work subtly challenges viewers to examine some of their most deeply held assumptions. "When you think of beauty in the past, it's beauty and the sublime," says Fan. "It has to come with this suspension, this fear. It also meant, in the past, to describe something that was so beautiful that it almost makes you want to puke."

Filmed at work in his Smack Mellon studio, Socrates Sculpture Park, and a biology lab, Fan also visits Yale University Medical Library for an arresting look at the work of nineteenth century painter Lam Qua. The painter's famed portraits of everyday Chinese subjects with medical "deformities" provide crucial inspiration and historical precedent for Fan.

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## MOUSSE

## Mother Is a Woman: Jes Fan Billy Tang

Hormones, silicone, and soap find themselves working in coexistence with glassblowing and laboratory methods of extraction and synthesis in Jes Fan's androgynous array of assemblages, which bring together biology and craft. Some appear furniture-like, thanks to armatures and extensions; others act as chemical-based interventions that permeate the bodies of participants. The works are unmistakably sculptural in terms of how the capacities of materials and concepts, natural and artificial, are harnessed together, modified, and/or lathered into one another. There is also a subtle biographical undercurrent through compositions constructed with a medical-like level of precision, and where intersections frequently occur with concepts of otherness, identity formation, and the biopolitics of a gendered body.

A key dimension of Fan's practice is its focus on structural questions that underpin moments of racial or gendered "othering," resonating with what Mel Y. Chen articulates as "animacy." Originally a term in linguistics, Chen uses it in an expanded sense to encompass our generative relationships with the natural world, inorganic matter, and other trans-natural structures. Chen cites a scare related to lead contamination in children's toys that in the U.S. came to trigger latent fears of an exogenous contagionwhere toxic levels of lead were suddenly animated through an associative jump into shorthand for something irrevocably "Chinese" endangering the homes of white suburbia.<sup>1</sup> Fan responds not only to the visceral aspects of this animacy, but also to the precarious moments where they latch onto traits associated with the physiology of the human body, which are rendered either abhorrent or emancipatory, depending on their inflection within the dominant culture.

In the *Diagram* series (2018–ongoing), Fan reflects on the epidermis as a site where racial differentiation emerges out of and becomes reassembled into a modular assembly of biomorphic armatures using handcrafted elements combined with science. Approximations of the skin's outer layer are scaled to the proportion of tables and shelves, acquiring architectural functionality as support structures for an arrangement of hand-blown glass orbs coaxed into shapes that recall the buildup of fluids, tumors, or other organic extensions of the body. This subtle dissonance between familiarity and abjectness hovers across the many fragmented bodies of Fan's work, where resistance takes the form of deconstructing formations of identity and social organization.

In Fan's treatment of melanin, the biological pigment responsible for color in human hair and skin is artificially grown in a laboratory. The organic pigment, once separated from the human body, appears tepid and unassuming as a solitary substance. Its social capacity as the cellular makeup of race relations is temporarily voided out, allowing its material properties to be mined further and stretched toward other applications, such as coatings for the frames and furniture tops of the sculptures. Melanin is known to absorb light, but also for its ability to dissipate and thrive on radiation, and Fan has developed a technique of synthesizing these properties into a new membrane that features in a large body of their work. Together using a mixture of resin, layers of colors coagulate onto one another before sanding down to a camouflage of gradient skin tones. In the diptych *Forniphilia I* and *II* (2018), the desire and gratification for the body to be coaxed beyond different physical thresholds becomes an homage to Law Siufang, a gender-fluid body builder whose pierced nipple, chest, and shoulders are tenderly cast as a portrait using the same resin and displayed on a shelf covered in artificial fur.

The experience of diaspora is to be perpetually displaced by the pull between languages, but it is also the accrual of loss and a dispersal of potentialities that shape who we are.<sup>2</sup> In Cantonese culture, kinship is a concept deeply ingrained with problems of inclusion and feelings of inferiority. It functions as a relational system that differentiates people according to generation, lineage, age, and gender, which in turn influences how behaviors and desires circulate in the public sphere. The video Mother Is a Woman (2018) is accompanied by an intervention into this order of relations in the form of a skin lotion-one intended for people visiting the enclosed setting of an exhibition, and made using estrogen extracted from Fan's mother's urine. This gesture evokes, in a perverse way, intrusions similar to how we inadvertently inhale artificial aromas diffused into the airways of commercial "deodorized" spaces. In this chemically induced matrix of associative meanings, cosmetic products too are frequently commercial surrogates to convey familial devotion or hospitality, particularly in the ritual gift economy specific to Hong Kong.

This dissolution between bodies, ecosystems, and institutions highlights how entanglements such as social attachments can be bioengineered or manipulated. In the video element of *Mother Is a Woman*, which serves as a promotional ad for the lotion, the artist uses the transference of sex hormones as a conduit to ask the audience open-ended questions: If your body absorbs a woman's estrogen, are you feminized by her? Does it change who are you to her, and who are you to Fan? Can the epidermis be a first contact of kinship?<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Mel Y. Chen, Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2012). Chen is an associate professor of gender and women's studies and director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture at the University of California, Berkeley.
- Jo-ey Tang, "How does one process and understand change at a distance," an unrealized text in response to a conversation with the writer related to issues of diaspora and the practice of Félix González-Torres.
  From the artist's statement.

J. Fan, B. Tang 161 Jes Fan, *Site of Cleavage* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist

<sup>159 (</sup>Top) Jes Fan, *Function Begets Form*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Lance Brewer

<sup>159 (</sup>Bottom) Jes Fan, *Mother Is A Woman* (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong 160 Jes Fan, *Systems II* (detail), 2018. Courtesy: the artist





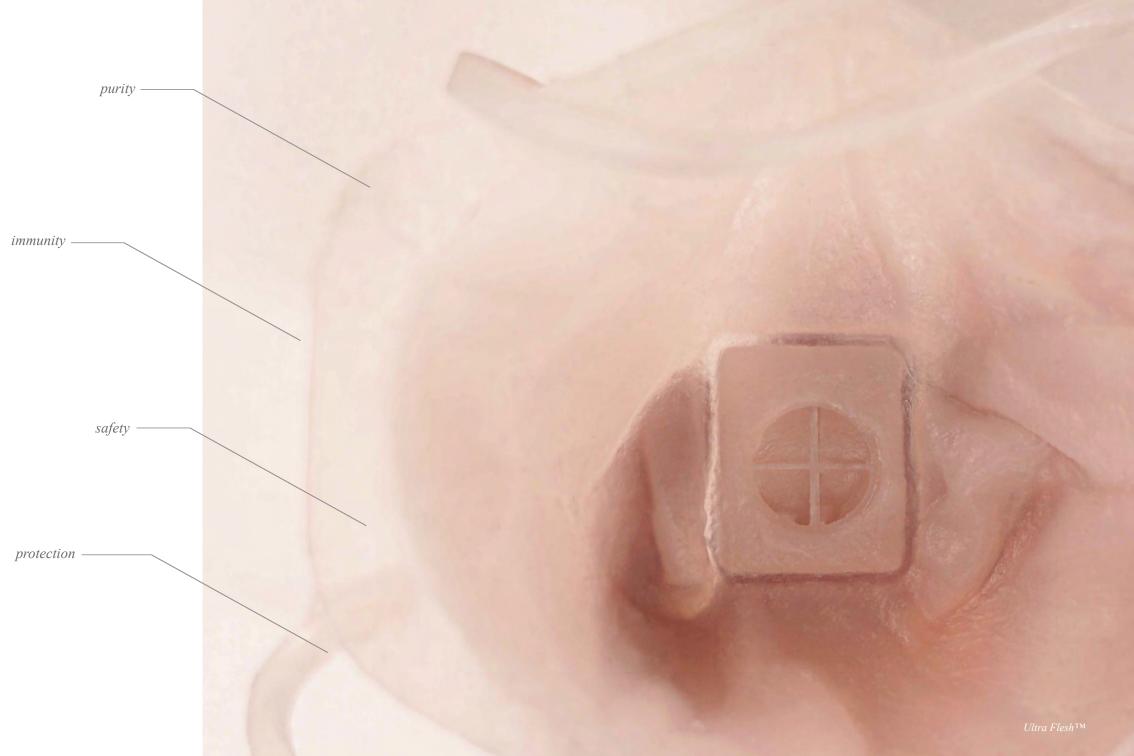
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THE IMMUNE SYSTEM MUST RECOGNIZE SELF IN SOME MANNER IN ORDER TO REACT TO **SOMETHING** FOREIGN.

Golub, Edward S., Immunology: a Synthesis, 1987

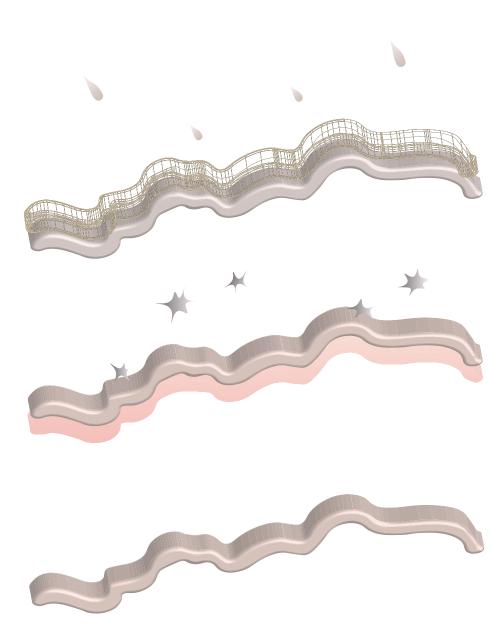




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## sculpture

Xenophoria (still), 2020. HD color, 8 min.

A Conversation with Jes Fan

by Jan Garden Castro

Jes Fan's work unspools complexities, unifies diversities, and creates new forms of beauty. His unique vision includes abstract systems that allude to gender and racial distinctions as well as to outer/inner structures, merging art, science, philosophy, and cultural histories. This fluid approach embraces trans and queer states of flux-beyond traditional binary masculine/feminine categories. Using glass, testosterone, estrogen, melanin, wax, and soybeans, Fan, who identifies as trans, creates sensuous forms that fit into the body's curves and folds, sometimes transitioning from liquid to elastic to solid states. Through these works, he updates and reinterprets Heraclitus's maxim "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" to demonstrate another truth applicable to every human being—"We're always in a state of flux." In ways both subtle and dramatic, Fan proves that binary oppositions are false, outdated constructs that differ from biological facts. In fact, he suggests, what's inside counts most.

This year, Fan, who was born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong, is participating in both the Sydney Biennale (March 4-June 8, 2020) and the Liverpool Biennial (July 11-October 25, 2020). He also has a show scheduled for 2022 at The Kitchen.

Jan Garden Castro: You have said that your work is about biology but is not biographical; you address themes "beyond trans-ness," which are about "the liminality of being a biological body in an age when the body is reconfigured in terms of the molecular, the digital, and the



THIS PAGE: **Testo Soap, 2017.** Lye, cottonseed oil, Depo-Testosterone, and silicone, 20 x 13 x 15 cm.

#### OPPOSITE:

*Forniphilia II,* 2018. Aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood, and artificial fur, 38 x 35 x 20 cm.

#### informational (to borrow the words of Rachel C. Lee)." Could you discuss these directions further?

Jes Fan: I don't want my identity to hyphenate the work I do or my status as an artist. In so much of the art world now, the artist becomes the spectacle and also the content of the work. I'm not interested in that. My work has to do with decentering not just in terms of the role of the artist, but in terms of humans in general-the importance of history or value that's anthropocentric. By quoting from Rachel C. Lee's Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies (2016), I am trying to say that when you think about what constitutes you as an individual in late capitalism, I am hesitant to call the sausage casing that I'm encased in completely mine. We're in a day and age when apples are packed in plastic cling film in supermarkets. Everything is neatly packaged. We think of ourselves as impenetrable with no leakage or porosity, but in fact, we're more entangled with each other; and what leaks out at stages is not what we think of in literal terms.

For *Mother is a Woman*, I made an estrogen cream from my mother's urine and distributed it to people outside of my kin. If you are feminized by my mother's estrogen, who are you to her and who is she to you? What if I re-feminize my masculinized body? Is that natural? How do we make these complications clear? Also, my mother's femininity is manufactured by the fact that she takes estrogen for her menopause. There are more than pharmaceutical entanglements and



a more nuanced way of thinking between what we present as an authentic self and reality. Think about cartilage as a joinery between bones—small connections tether us to each other and to plants. Birth control pills come from testing done on women in Puerto Rico, which is discussed in *Beyond the Natural Body* by Nelly Oudshoorn. I push back from calling myself a trans artist. I'm an artist.

## **JGC:** You constructed *Visible Woman* using 3D-printed body parts. Did they start out as real body parts?

JF: No, they came from a modeling toy. Two years ago, I was living in Red Hook, and I found a Visible Woman kit left out on the street. I took her essential organs, which in that kit included a fetus. Can you believe that? A lot of women don't have fetuses, or uteruses for that matter. I splayed them out as an architectural display. The frame design came from the Gundam anime model. My father ran a factory making Gundam toys. I spent a huge part of my childhood watching my siblings snapping the robot parts off of these frames. I didn't play with them. I loved Barbies. I chopped their hair off, gave them tattoos, and disembodied them.

## JGC: Does your work assert that binary theories are false?

JF: These loops and holes connect us. Binary draws a line between this and that. I'm cautious of it. To be othered is the result of needing to mark oneself as not the other, a.k.a. normal.

## JGC: Like much of your work, *what eye no see, no can do,* which you made for the 2019 Socrates Sculpture Park Annual (on view through March 8, 2020), calls attention to what's unseen inside our bodies.

JF: In that piece, I was trying to imitate a stomach or an organ with an elaborate but not useful digestive system. The piping imitates the possibility of fluids going through, in, and out. That motif of circulation goes through my systems series. In my mind, the piping marks an entanglement that I was trying to describe earlier, but in a more graphic and visual way. It also references the imagery of scientific diagrams. Many of the systems series works, *what eye no see, no can do*,

## What drives my studio practice is to probe the 'what-ifs.' What is that? Where is

What is that? Where is this from? How is this made?



and the work for the Sydney Biennale are attempts to turn the skin inside out—like when you take your socks off and the inside comes out first.

JGC: What are you planning for the Liverpool Biennial?

JF: I'm going to make more of the series "what eye no see, no can do." It will be a living system in a warehouse space. The title is a quotation from Lam Qua, the celebrated early 19th-century painter, who said that if his eye can't see it, he can't do it. There's something funny about that. Lam Qua was known for not flattering the sitter. His medical drawings from the 1830s through '60s are at the Yale Medical Library and the Gordon Museum of Pathology in London. I have an obsession with him and see myself reflected in his work. In some way, I try to do the opposite—to bring a microscope to what you think you saw. Close up, when your eye actually sees the molecules of oil, the grains of melanin that denote race, it's so absurd that you don't know what to do with it.

My older works are mostly castings. Now I'm rendering them in a different material, such as silicone, and turning those castings of a barbell or a weight into abstractions. If you push things that we've associated with certain identity categories, such as sex hormones in a specific sex or race and melanin, to the smallest molecular level in an attempt to find a biological anchor to it, it becomes remarkably absurd and abstract. Those flecks of melanin contained in tubes in my studio look like nothing more than wet dust—abstract at that basic material level.

The figure is not enough to explain the potential of that. I see a lot of figurative art during this current identity politics discussion. I don't trust the figure. In America, figuratively is the opposite of literally; it is used to mean "abstractly speaking." What's more telling than that?

**JGC:** That relates to your idea of putting biological markers into glass molds that fit into body parts.

JF: I have an obsession with vessels. Ever since I was a little kid, I've collected vessels and capsules, things that contain. When I discovered thrift stores in America, I bought vintage suitcases. In a residency at Wheaton Arts, I first made cement knots, and I blew glass on top. It came out remarkably well. Even my obsession with mold making is trying to capture the negative space around an object. I'm interested

## jes fan I



in something about that relationship. The mass can become a container. I started casting body parts on a friend, including the belly, back, armpit, and pecs. I had them replicated in plaster and blew glass on them. That creates the perfect fit, meaning they can fit back into the body part assuming the body didn't change form.

#### JGC: In your studio, next to the Lam Qua painting of a Chinese lady with a huge tumor, you have test tubes and kinetics. What kinds of experiments are you doing?

JF: When I have an idea, I go for it. The kinetic experiment was for *Resistance Training*, which imitates an organ inflating or deflating as you sleep. I'm wary of discussing ideas that haven't materialized; in the past, other artists have plagiarized my work, so I can't talk about future projects. What drives my studio practice is to probe the "what-ifs." What *is* that? Where is this from? How is this made?" I ask fundamental questions, but push them to a point of absurdity.

## **JGC:** As a Studio Artist at the Museum of Arts and Design, you experimented with soybeans. How did

#### you discover that testosterone and estrogen both come from soybeans, and how are you using this as an artist?

JF: I'm curious about where things come from. I grew up in the highly capitalized society of Hong Kong. Imagine descending from your apartment building into the subway, which is a mall, and then you travel through the subway to your office on top of another mall-in Hong Kong, you can go from work to home completely mediated by public transport and not go outdoors. And everything is air conditioned. The generation before me did manufacturing, but the manufacturing industry is no longer there. I grew up not asking, "Where is that from?" In Hong Kong, they interviewed children who had just graduated from kindergarten and asked, "What color is an apple?" They said, "It's red in the textbook, but it's white in life." Most of the time, their parents peel the skin off for them. It's that disjunction with nature and not questioning where things are from or how they are made that drives me.

Studying glass made me ask these questions. One experience that bore a hole through my psyche was visiting a glass factory in Corning, New York, when I was



taking glass-blowing classes. We took a trip to a factory making white glass that mimicked porcelain. Imagine a furnace the size of a living room, maybe three stories tall, with silica melting in a pot and raining downward to the other floors of the factory. As this honey drips through the belts, it gets pressed through rollers and starts looking like Fruit Roll-Ups. Giant cookie cutters cut circles and circles of flat plates that get draped over a slight curvature, and two balloons print an image on them. This is all going on through the floors of the factory. Meanwhile, the glass is pliable. When the balloons print the plate, I realize, "That's the plate my mom has in her kitchen, the plate I grew up with." That plate is my Proustian madeleine moment. It's my plate, but also not my plate. My childhood, also how I've come to contextualize my adulthood, is really not that special. I'm just an object among objects.

#### JGC: You began blowing glass at RISD. How does your notion of what you want to do with glass differ from the goals of most glass blowers?

JF: I was obsessed with mastering glass blowing for four or five years in my early 20s. Hotshops and glass culture are extremely macho and steeped in the idea of being virtuosic with traditional techniques. I wanted to FROM LEFT: *Mother Is A Woman (Cream)*, 2019. Estrogen, lotion, test tube, silicone, and pigment, 25 x 20 x 8 cm.

#### Systems I,

2018. Metal, aqua resin, silicone, melanin, and glass, 183 x 168 x 168 cm.

attain that in order to be respected by the other men in the hotshop, so I tried really hard to blow the thinnest goblets or make the largest bell jars. At some point though I realized that, ultimately, it's a performance, and I can go buy masculinity instead of trying to perform masculinity. I also realized that I'm not sure whose virtuosity or whose tradition we're trying to replicate. Why am I interested in the Italian tradition? Why are these burly men whipping out iron sticks to blow the pansiest goblet to imitate lace? I also had pyromaniac tendencies, and glass blowing became a huge Venn diagram for my obsession with vessels and containers.

### JGC: Your library is extraordinary for its depth and breadth, including books by Judith Butler, Carl Jung, and Nelly Oudshoorn. You've recommended Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. What are your formative books or authors?

JF: I like a balance between contemporary art research and poetry. Right now I'm reading James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. I treasure fiction as being a more potent way of truth-telling than science research papers. I like Rebecca Solnit and *Jane* by Maggie Nelson—she can master four sentences to paint a full picture with the right balance of poetry and precision.



#### JGC: Which books discuss nonbinary systems?

JF: Butler, in particular, talks about othering as an attempt to establish the normal—without the other, there is no normal. That kind of thinking is similar to Chinese painting; most Chinese ink drawing is trying to use the ink to demarcate the negative space in the landscape.

## JGC: Your glass work creates bodies in which hormones and melanin are isolated from biology.

JF: With a glass container, your eye can see and your hand can get as close as it can to biological matter without it being inside of you. The glass has a barrier. The cream doesn't have a barrier, and you can feel the heaviness and the lightness of the matter. They're still markers, but they are isolated from the container of our bodies.

#### JGC: Could you talk about your sensuous videos of everything from a dough-like Kombucha SCOBY to a Xenophora shell?

JF: *Xenophoria* is named for the Xenophora shell, which scientists call the artist's shell; it's a living being that grafts objects onto itself. I feel akin to this animal. The video imitates this animalistic impulse—one beyond what our minds can logicize or make sense of. It's a montage of me attempting to find melanin in fungi, the ink sac in squid, E. coli in the laboratory, in skin, in irises, in molds.

## JGC: What's the message from finding and isolating melanin?

JF: It's a pigment for many markers—how people draw the line of othering darker bodies. I find melanin in almost every single organism whether or not people see it as alive. I want to make it more apparent that we all contain melanin.

#### JGC: What is your direction now?

JF: I'm obsessed with materials that show states of transformation such as from liquid to solid. There's nothing crazier than encountering a furnace at 3,000 degrees and bringing liquid out, almost like stirring honey in a pot, and solidifying it and inflating it with your lungs. There's something poetic about that process, and my desire now is to play, to unlearn what I took from the lessons of trying to attain machismo.

## **66** I don't want my identity to hyphenate the work I do or my status as an artist.

In so much of the art world now, the artist becomes the spectacle and also the content of the work.



march/april SCUIDTURE 63 https://sculpturemagazine.art/ © 2020 Sculpture

# R E V I E W

#### Jes Fan: art from the peripheries

New York-based artist Jes Fan discusses identity, inspiration and the intersection of art and science ahead of his upcoming lecture as part of the Perspectives series.

12 March 2020 by Sarah Couper

Your lecture at the Guildhouse is titled Leakages, Puddles, Discharge, Infections and Bubbles, a collection of things that make people feel uncertain or uneasy. Can you tell me about the part these spillages and hazards play in your work as an artist?

It's funny, when I named the lecture, I had no idea that the coronavirus was coming, but now these words have taken on more hazardous associations. The question of how to protect yourself as an individual, within a completely contained bubble, is a big concern for people all around the world, who are wearing gloves on the trains, covering all their orifices in public. Going through coronavirus in the age of social media is extremely different from what we went through with SARS before viral media.



Han Minu

I've been thinking a lot about this... I realised that it was only after SARS that we started packaging fruits in plastic wraps. What I'm trying to say is that we're thinking of ourselves as insulated beings or trying to achieve this idea of a sort of hygienic capsule. I want to challenge this in my work. We are all more exposed to each other than we would like to think, and the coronavirus kind of proves that.

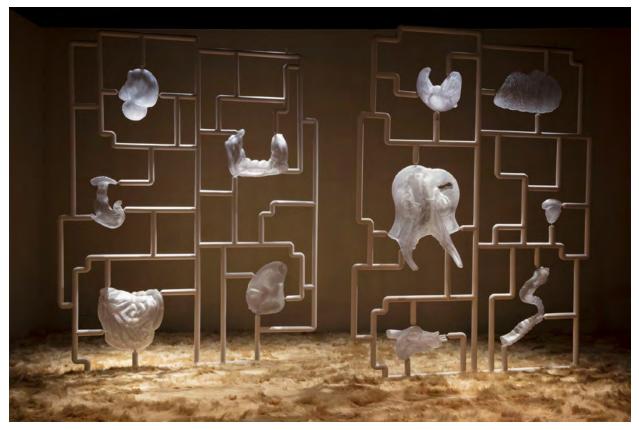
# You're a queer artist of colour, working in the United States in divisive and turbulent times. Does this affect the kind of work you're compelled to make?

I'm definitely not a political artist. I hesitate to hyphenate my role as an artist and I push back whenever there's an article that underscores my identity as an artist with labels such as trans or Asian or queer. I am an artist and make work wherever my ideas take root. If you think about an artist like Donald Judd people don't associate his work with his background of being an engineer or his being a white cis white male as the source of why he makes these white cubes. But somehow to understand my work, it must be contextualised with my biography and it really accentuates how wide the gulf is. I have a lot of reservations about that.

# You were born in Canada and spent your formative childhood years in Hong Kong. Does this give you a different perspective on what's unfolding in the United States?

I was born in Canada because my parents immigrated due to fear of the handover. My dad doesn't speak fluent English and quickly realised that jobs he'd get there would not satisfy his ambition. So, we moved back to Hong Kong where I spent most of my childhood. I distinctively remember the experience of moving to the US. I went to school in Providence and realised that I was now part of the minority. Growing up as an Asian in Hong Kong, I was part of the majority but here I became part of the other.

So, understanding those two sides – those who belong in the interior, and those who belong in the exterior – I'm sure that has, in some way, affected my work. I still consider Hong Kong as home despite living in the US for 10 years now. I feel at home in between those places. I also enjoy being in the peripheries, I find it a generative place to be.



Jes Fan, Visible Woman, 2018

Jes Fan, *Lick*, Animacy Arrangement, 2017 Courtesy the artist

Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

#### Was art a part of your childhood?

I don't think I grew up a lot around art. I grew up in malls and watching television. My grandfather on my mother's side is a huge antique collector and my dad is an interior design fanatic. I think some of that interest was picked up through osmosis.

Your work often fuses objects or ideas together in unexpected ways. You've created hairbrushes connected by a long rope of hair in place of bristles or human organs connected via an organised network of tubes. I think there is something unsettling in these disjuncts. What draws you to recasting familiar objects in an uncertain light?

I think it's just a combination of coincidence and imagination. One of the works you mentioned, Visible Woman, came from me wandering near my neighbourhood in Red Hook and finding this old toy of the same name. It was a biology teaching kit containing the part of the visible woman. There's also a version of the visible man, but the visible woman version has a foetus in it. That fascinated me. It suggested so many questions. What constitutes womanhood? What makes a woman visible? I decided to select versions of all the vital organs that sustained the functioning of a biological woman, enlarge them and put them on display.



Jes Fan, *Poke*, Animacy Arrangement, 2017 Courtesy the artist

# You also use a lot of biological references in your practice. What draws you the sciences in your art practice?

I guess I'm less interested in biology and fascinated in material engineering. I'm really interested in what things are made from, how they are made and their materiality. Those questions can be applied to the self. Who am I? What is my race? What is that made of? I see biology as an extension of my interest in materiality. I have no scientific background. I failed biology and chemistry and physics in high school. But the role of an artist can give you insights into many fields. You know a little bit about everything. You are curious and, in turn, people become curious about what you do. I often find my-self collaborating with people that are not artists in the traditional sense, biohackers, for instance.

Art is so pluralistic these days. There's no need to stick to one medium and, you know, I'd be so bored.



🖊 ART 🖌

#### ONES TO WATCH IN 2020

亞洲 藝 壇 新 星

站在2020年的起點,我們對未來理應有無限期待,但撲面而 來 的 竟 然 是 比 2 0 1 9 年 更 要 嚴 峻 的 挑 戰 。 在 「 離 奇 過 小 說 」 的 世界,今日晤知聽日事,無人可以預測未來,更遑論是充滿 不穩定性的藝壇。下筆之時,原訂於3月香港巴塞爾藝術展 和ART CENTRAL終告取消。網上流傳,香港畫廊會自 發性地舉辦活動,譬如網上展覽。無論如何,相信在這一年, 我們仍然可以在國際藝壇下看見以下的藝術家大放異彩。





BYSTANDER #002, 2016©MARI KATAYAMA. COURTESY OF RIN ART ASSOCIATION.





ON THE WAY HOME #005, 2016©MARI KATAYAMA. COURTESY OF RIN ART ASSOCIATION.

雦

ON THE WAY HOME #001, 2016©MARI KATAYAMA. COURTESY OF RIN ART ASSOCIATION

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2019年 1987年 (MARI KATAYAMA) 體 展 進 影 始 在 異 腳 天生罹患脛骨的半 於 0 藝 在 蓺 另 六 常 你的聲音」、 譬 術 出 術 威尼斯雙 各 人的 外 如 本 家 舞 生 大 , 木CROSSING 群 台 「2017年 於 藝 身體結構並沒 她 展 上 日 術 的 年展等等 名 15 左手 VOL.14 J 獎 本 聲 瀨戶內國 埼 項 東 ,缺了三 肢 大 和 成 玉 畸 京 噪 縣 展 長 形 都 (有阻 2016: 覽 於 的 ` 攝 根 自2012 際 片 森 影 看 日 撓片 藝 手 歲 Щ 見 本 美 美 指 時 衏 我 群 直 術 術 她 Щ 0 截 節 年 館 館 的 真 天 去 馬 的 玾

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WRITER SAMWAI LAM PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS





INSTALLATION VIEW, MOTHER IS A WOMAN, 2019, IMAGE COURTESY TO THE ARTIST AND EMPTY GALLERY, HONG KONG. PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL YU

打印樹 學士 這樣是否令其更加女性化? 霜塗上自己的雙頰,在生物學的角度上 IS 並 用 送 重 印 界線愈來愈含糊。JES另一個令人留下深刻 包 分拆的器官擱置在管子上,失去皮囊保護 剖 的 作 時 草 行 索 展 港 容看來, 結 范 當下科技發展的世界,所謂生物和非生物的 , 象 的 裹的器官猶如世間上的其他物質,尤其是 出 將之製造 固 到 新 模 衝 地 , 長大,其 合理性和感性, 加 ₽ 品 , 的 山相萃取 審視性別概念。他把母親的尿液樣本 首個 美國的大學實驗室進行處理,從中利 型 毯 像 。JES的不少作品亦是對性別身體的探 。 3 月,他的作品於第2 2屆悉尼雙年展 動 特 撲 WOMAN≫ (JES 脂 的 之前在 別 面 改 作品《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》 , 同樣出眾。JES在加拿大出生,香 、PPE管等物料製成 像 着 而 造 個 《VISIBLE WOMAN》, FAN) 成 後在羅德島設計學院獲純藝術 原本 , 挪用1960年代同名的人體 重 來 展 分解、抽 ()的就 一種美顏 質 , 香 的 感 的 他 港EMPTY GALLERY舉 無 的 錄 , 是 畫 用 論從表現形式和藝術內 作 品 工 ∽像裏, 肉色 廊空 氣味 有 霜 取 種 母親的雌激素 藝和理論並 <del>\$</del> 和 牆 在 間 主角把雌激素 人 質 壁 0 像 《MOTHER - 和人造 很 感 觀 ,用上3D 個個被 者 進 想 0 觸 他 解 摸 的 場 皮



SYSTEMS III, 2019,SILICONE, GLASS, EPOXY, MELANIN, ESTRADIOL, WOOD, 48 X 25 X 19 IN 122 X 64 X 48 CM, IMAGE COURTESY TO THE ARTIST.



MOTHER IS A WOMAN, 2018, STILL,VIDEO, COLOR HD,4:43 MIN, 16:9, IMAGE COURTESY TO THE ARTIST AND EMPTY GALLERY, HONG KONG.

# CATALYST feminism, theory, technoscience

Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2020 with a special section on Chemical Entanglements Edited by Rachel Lee



# A Lattice of Chemicalized Kinship: Toxicant Reckoning in a Depressive-Reparative Mode

#### **Rachel Lee**

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#### Abstract

This essay introduces fourteen essays and artworks comprising this issue's Special Section, Critical Commentary, Critical Perspectives, Lab Meeting, and cover art that address the topic of *Chemical Entanglements: Gender and Exposure*. This introduction emphasizes not only the varied vernaculars of chemicalized knowing highlighted in this scholarship and artwork but also their shared theorization of how specific molecular encounters are propelled by biopolitical systems that extend or curtail relationality amongst humans, other species, and the environment.

Operation Ranch Hand, the mass bombardment of the Vietnamese landscape with a combination of chemicals dubbed the Rainbow Agents from 1961 to 1971, may not be a widely recognized name, but its most famous herbicide, Agent Orange, certainly is.<sup>1</sup> David Zierler's (2011) *The Invention of Ecocide* tells of a coterie of US scientists—those who would coin the term *ecocide*—horrified at the botanical devastation wrought by the Rainbow Agents.<sup>2</sup> Not only did they reject the US war department's assertion that herbicides targeted plants rather than people as unscientific, they also rejected the idea that Operation Ranch Hand did not violate the 1925 Geneva Protocol's ban on the use of chemical weapons.<sup>3</sup> These scientists further claimed that the indiscriminate use of the herbicides increased rather than lessened global insecurity. As Yale botanist Arthur Galston

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stated at the 1971 Senate foreign relations committee hearings on the Geneva Conventions, "[Man] is totally dependent on and cannot substitute for that thin mantle of green matter living precariously on the partially decomposed rock that we call soil...'All flesh is as grass.' [That biblical] statement is as true today as it was when it was written" (US Congress Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1972, pp. 325–326).<sup>4</sup> Asserting that the health effects of chemical contamination on plant and soil could not be contained to a period of active military engagement, Galston emphasized that chemical warfare's effects bled across both time and species boundaries, rendering humanity and the planetary ecology *less* secure.

The historical period in which these scientists voiced their concern overlapped with environmental activism, as galvanized by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Nevertheless, these scientists critical of ecocide, Zierler (2011) stresses, were not part of a larger green movement: "If Ranch Hand was an operation of resource extraction, it would not be ecocide" (p. 18). In short, if linked to increased economic productivity as defined by the industrialized West, the release of toxicant chemicals would not be (as) objectionable. What I want to draw attention to here is the premise inherent in this distinction: that the weaponizing of toxicant chemicals in acts of warfare expressly meant to despoil and eliminate the vital productivity of a habitat for years to come is believed to be categorically different from the spread of similar poisons by mining interests, oil and natural gas extraction, petrochemical refineries, factories, and industrial agriculture, as long as the latter occurs in the name of building and maintaining the infrastructures of big business in the Global North. What is accomplished by this premise?

According to this logic, a kind of border wall exists between acts of war on enemy territory and acts of industry in domestic settings. My claim here is that this border-wall thinking not only fundamentally misunderstands the actions of chemical toxicants as they wend their way through ecological systems—through soil, surface and ground water, air, and bioaccumulation in nonhuman and human species dwelling in those spaces (Blais, 2005; Genuis, 2009)—but, more importantly, that it offers a fiction of comfort for elite subjects of the Global North. That fiction of comfort involves, first, imagining themselves geographically protected from the toxicant spillovers and secondary contaminations that will occur only over "there" (in foreign territory) and not also "here" (in the homeland). Second, it provides further psychic "cover:" for these same elite subjects not to feel morally culpable because no intentional war (by the sovereign nation to which one holds allegiance) has been declared against either the people or habitats that have been so fouled.<sup>5</sup>

By carving out as an exception from "ecocide" those actions of industrial polluters, then, border-wall thinking assumes the self-evident worthiness of pollutionridden resource extraction to feed the engine of industrialized capitalism.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it props up what we now know as the dubious sufficiency of "separation, containment, clean up and immunization" (Liboiron, Tironi, & Calvillo, 2018, p. 332), as adequate methods of countering the depletion of health and proliferation of disablement—these certain sequelae not only of war but also of "industrialization, economic growth and capitalism" (Liboiron, Tironi, & Calvillo, 2018, p. 334). By recalling this history, then, I mean to draw attention to the speciousness of the boundaries asserted between domestic manufacture, agroindustry, and capitalist production qua carbon democracy (Mitchell, 2011), on the one hand, and international warfare,<sup>7</sup> extraterritorial destruction, and the maiming and killing of human lives, on the other, a necessary first step for mapping out multiple vernaculars of *chemicalized knowing*.

Recalling these events of fifty-years ago may seem an odd way to introduce the collection of fourteen essays and artworks comprising this volume's Special Section, Critical Commentary, Critical Perspectives, Lab Meeting, and cover art that address the theme of Chemical Entanglements: Gender and Exposure. By starting with the inseparability of industry—that is, the building and expansion of infrastructures of modernity—and ecocidal assaults, this introduction orients toward everyday expertise from communities for whom the "benefits" of industrialization were never primarily intended. For such communities, the pollutant emissions and toxicant exposures inherent to modernization plans are harder to justify (or excuse) as incidental to the functioning of their civilizations, notwithstanding the ideological framing of such place-based, non-industrialized modes of living as "primitive." The essays in this special section employ feminist, Indigenous, decolonial, and postcolonial STS frameworks that help us to develop a vernacular of chemicalized knowing through the lives, theories, practices, and knowledges of women, LGBTQ communities, people of color, and those dreaming of disability justice (Piepzna-Samarsinha, 2018). In particular, three essays in this special section (by Radaan & Murphy; Fiske; and Barba)-together forming the assemblage "Petro- and Agro-Wars by Chemical Proxy"-focus on the foreclosure of reproductive futurity for Indigenous and Brown settler populations through undeclared "wars by chemical proxy" (my citation of this term, not theirs) conducted by the petrochemical, oil, and agricultural industries.<sup>8</sup> This trio of essays most clearly proceeds in a mode of argumentation that understands the production and widespread distribution of toxicants as part of the moral compass of Western capitalist industry—a mode of argumentation shared by the majority

#### of the pieces collected in this issue.

The remainder of the articles and artworks on the theme of Chemical Entanglements are introduced by way of three more assemblages (even as some articles overlap). "Educational Entanglements" brings together an interview, three shorter essays, and a longer research article (see Soto; Lasker & Simcox; Grandia; Bayalaniss & Garnett; and O'Laughlin) on how schools and institutions of higher education are often envisioned as great equalizers, spaces where students regardless of race can study and take part in cutting-edge research that will help government and health practitioners address toxicant trespass. Nevertheless, these works highlight how educational institutions (including university laboratories), in their current dimensions, need reforming so that they do not extend chemical and social injury. The third subgroup, "Vernaculars of Consumption," is a trio of articles focused on "feminine" consumption circuits involving beauty cream, menstrual technology, and goods that protect the health of prospective babies (Tessaro; Vaughn; and Ford). Last, "Cognizing Chemicals through Aesthetic Forms," comes together by way of critical reflexivity on art as a mode to materialize and represent lateral movements toward disability justice among intoxicated subjects. Across all four assemblages, I attend to these authors' and artists' attentive listening to vernaculars of chemicalized knowing as well as the biopolitical systems propelling molecular encounters that extend or curtail relationality amongst humans, other species, and the environment.9

Before detailing further these four subgroupings, let me briefly comment on the mobilization of estrogen in the work of Brooklyn- and Hong Kong–based artist Jes Fan—a photo of whose work graces the cover of this issue.<sup>10</sup> Fan's 2018 piece, *Mother Is a Woman*—viewable as a four-minute, forty-four-second color video (shot by Asa Westcott)<sup>11</sup>—gently mocks the vernacular of commercial advertising selling an abundance of commodities to fill the anomie created by attenuated social relationships (and the waning of enchantment) that are also hallmarks of modernity. The video begins with a close up of white cream in a large centrifuge tube—a beauty product infused with estrogen sourced from the urine of Fan's mother (Figure 1).

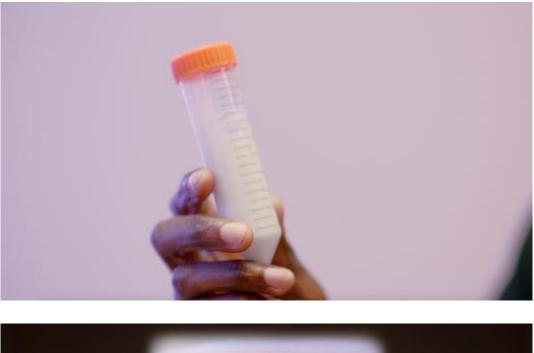
The video toggles between scenes in a laboratory—the technician's blue latex gloves pipetting and injecting various substances into receptacles—and close-ups of various people, ungloved and dabbing the white emollient onto their hands and cheeks. Around the thirty-second mark, a voiceover begins detailing the art and science behind this cream's manufacture:

Using artisanal technology, we worked closely with laboratories in America to extract the purest estrogen from my mother's urine...Beyond a beauty cream, *Mother Is a Woman* invites you to rethink kinship through the pores of your skin. Can our epidermis be a first contact of kinship?...*Mother Is a Woman* asks, "Who are you to her [my Hong Kong–based mother]?" And, "Who are you to me?"<sup>12</sup>

Rather than using estrogen as an ingredient to abstract into a commodity form the consumer's relationship to their younger self (see Lara Tessaro's related essay in this volume, on how estrogen creams—poorly regulated at mid-century promised a more youthful, glowing appearance), Fan's artwork torques the vernacular of consumption to purposes of social bonding with and through a wrinkled, elder Asian woman's urine. Those who slowly massage the cream into their skin cutaneously imbibe, so to speak, the sexing powers of Mother—a queer method of "feminiz[ation]" (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup>

Because the mode of consumption is cutaneous rather than oral, *Mother Is a Woman* also reminds us that what we perceive as the human body's largest organ system—the skin—is also an aperture or, rather, a lattice of openings onto the world.<sup>14</sup> My introduction's title, "A Lattice of Chemicalized Kinship," takes inspiration from this artwork's delight in rendering the *epidermal lattice* a positively figured channel of molecular *kinship* through which to counterbalance the segregating tendencies of epidermal racism.<sup>15</sup>

This 2018 work solicits the waywardness of a "single-sourced" endocrinedisrupting chemical, refiguring it as a relation-building substance precisely through its feminization powers. In contrast, Fan's work featured on the cover of this issue, *Systems II* (2018), suspends estrogen—as well as testosterone, fat, and melanin—holding them apart in glass orbs, as if to disrupt, not so much their molecular pathways but the marshalling of their phenotypical effects, on the surface of human bodies, towards biopolitical ends—as vectors for profiling, stratifying, and hierarchizing social groups according to skin color and gender presentation (see Figure 3). The work's title, *Systems II*, likely refers to overlapping systems of binary sex/gender, racialized eugenics, and capitalist property and accumulation regimes that parcel populations into those deserving life extension/support and those available for intensified labor exploitation and "maiming" (Puar, 2017) qua varieties of disablement and premature death. Introduction to Special Section: Chemical Entanglements





Figures 1 & 2. Installation views, *Mother Is a Woman*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo credit: Michael Yu.



Figure 3. *Systems II*, 2018. Composite resin, glass, melanin, estradiol, depo-testosterone, silicone, wood. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Systems II* performs and provokes this alchemical fantasy: to extract those systems and place them behind observation glass rather than what we have historically done—placed fleshly bodies into glass cages (i.e., a caste system of stratified political categories such as citizen vs. noncitizen; white, propertied, male, and enfranchised vs. Black, alien immigrant, female, and disenfranchised), so as to stare at those bodies as if they were the puzzling phenomena, and not those systems. As this pair of art pieces would indicate, becoming (again) chemically entangled can be figured as an affirmative practice—a relationship-building one—even as chemical deployments are themselves entangled in

biopolitical systems of social stratification, imperialism, and extractive accumulation. The fourteen assembled essays and artworks highlighted here epitomize careful listening to vernaculars, metaphors, and models that attempt to grapple with that conundrum.

# Assemblage I: Petro- and Agro-Wars by Chemical Proxy

This cluster of articles, as will become clear, proceeds by way of closely listening to the voices of Indigenous, poor, and colored communities, structurally positioned as most proximate to (accidental-deliberate) toxicant violence. As they testify to their visceral, sometimes multigenerational encounters with toxicants, a portrait of these communities emerges: they are nonconsensual human enrollees in field-based experiments conducted by the aforementioned industries. Second, these articles variously identify how the chronic releases of chemical pollutants are not so much unique forms of violence but function as a part of overlapping systems—such as, settler colonialism, exploitation of racialized labor, scientificgovernmental underregulation of chemical hazards, and corporate impunity—that collude with a white supremacist biopolitics. This white supremacist biopolitics, at best, regards indifferently the premature death of Black and Brown populations and at worst hastens the foreclosure of these communities' futures.

My reference to vernacular is indebted to an article in this section, Amelia Fiske's "Naked in the Face of Contamination: Thinking Models and Metaphors of Toxicity Together."<sup>16</sup> In this piece, Fiske establishes the importance of understanding toxicity in the "chemically saturated present" through the stories told by those living at ground zero of one of the world's worst environmental disasters-the site of Texaco's oil operations at the Ecuador-Columbia border. As indicated by her subtitle, Fiske forwards a critique of the limitations of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) models for understanding and standardizing toxicity prevention with respect to the lives of the residents of Lago Agrio. Because EPA toxicological assessments are calibrated to the First-World subject who wears shoes (metaphor, too, for having the luxury to pick up and leave a chemically contaminated area), they are deficient in modeling the health effects consequent upon oil extraction for those walking barefoot on roads slicked with oil (those who are stuck to and in place). Because of the tremendous power and authority of technoscientific modeling, Fiske does not claim that expert discourse should be discarded. After all, the legal judgment obtained in Ecuador against Texaco relies upon that modeling and calculation of harm. Nevertheless, we might ask, "Must grief and loss speak in the lingua franca of economic commerce?" Indeed, to convey the scale of Texaco's malfeasance is to cite the size of the monetary judgment against them: US\$9.5 billion. How is it that these numbers become the way to figure the

moral crimes of oil and petrochemical conglomerates? Could one, instead, listen without instrumentalizing the vernacular metaphors recounting grief, such as a Lago Agrio resident's figuring the sharp pains she endures as between an insect sting and a guided missile—"tsaaac!" (say it aloud)? Why is the untranslatability into a tidy sum the extent and texture of disablements and afflictions—from headaches, rashes, miscarriages, and sharp pains, to lost fur on dogs who go into seizure upon drinking the contaminated water—not enough?<sup>17</sup>

In Reena Shadaan and Michelle Murphy's article in this section, "Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) as Industrial and Settler Colonial Structures: Towards a Decolonial Feminist Approach," the authors link endocrine-disrupting chemical pollution to oil extraction in Ontario's Chemical Valley. They stress the importance of cultivating a decolonial feminist STS framework that is, like Fiske's article, deeply engaged with epistemologies tied to place and to indigeneity. Taking issue with well-meaning but flawed feminist environmental emphasis on hormone disrupters intruding into what are perceived as the most sacrosanct of spaces-the domestic nest, the bathroom and beauty cabinet, and the maternal womb-these authors underscore that this "heteronormative domesticated understanding of [endocrine-disrupting chemicals]" emphasizes the materialized greater burden on women to "manage environmental harms" via precautionary consumerism. Yet such narrow programs to shepherd the health of one's individual family "absolves the state of its responsibilities to regulate harmful toxicants, erases structural violence" and colludes with settler colonial infrastructures committed to Indigenous elimination. Shadaan and Murphy thus argue for a move away from "molecular, damage-centered, individualized or body-centered" frameworks, so as to recognize that pollution via endocrine disrupting chemicals is colonialism, part of the disruption of land-and-body relations made possible by "permission to pollute" regimes.

Also attending to epistemological insights from communities structurally positioned to be "swimming" in chemicals (a vernacular phrase quoted by Fiske), Mayra Barba's "Keeping Them Down: Neurotoxic Pesticides, Race, and Disabling Biopolitics," outlines the activism and care of a group of special education teachers and scientist-activists in California's Central Valley, who want flourishing futures for the children of predominantly low-wage Mexican American farmworkers. These educators focus on the EPA's 2017 refusal to ban from agricultural production the use of the pesticide chlorpyrifos, which works through inhibiting an enzyme important to brain function, an enzyme operative in both insects and humans—even fifteen years after the banning of this same neurotoxin from residential use because it presented "unacceptable risks to children." That

American-grown crops would not be available to US consumers or turned into global commodities without the metabolic overdrive of Latinx farmworkers' kidneys and livers is both a scandal and no longer news (Horton 2016). Most concerning to these communities themselves is the de facto maintenance of a transgenerational caste system through the mass cognitive disabling of Mexican American youth, what health scientists have dubbed a "chemical warfare on children's brains" (Rauh, et al, 2006, cited by Barba). Latinx and Mexican American communities, who have been placed at the forefront of agroindustrial poisoning, theorize the ongoing processes of their disabling as an issue of environmental justice and educational justice (Anesi, 2019).

# Assemblage II: Educational Entanglements

In addition to the efforts of the special education teachers and environmental scientists highlighted by Barba, an autoethnographic narrative by Liza Grandia, a white woman, relays a parallel story of environmental engagement by parents concerned over poor indoor-air quality at another elementary school (also, in California's Central Valley). Grandia's activism had its roots in her own embodied sensing of suspected sources of toxicant chemicals—the ubiquitous synthetic carpet covering the floors of her college offices. A chemotherapy survivor, Grandia conducted her own citizen science when she and some of her colleagues found themselves beset with a host of strange symptoms on days when they had been to their offices. "Carpet Bombings: A Drama of Chemical Injury in Three Acts" sketches the iterative struggles—replete with small victories and setbacks with environmental hazards research published just in time to counterweigh the skepticism of school board officials who at first mistake the "green labels" on carpets for more than what they are—a marketing scheme.<sup>18</sup> As this story emphasizes, the hazards faced by Central Valley communities come not only from aerial sprays of neurotoxic pesticides in the fields but from the ordinary, mundane materials underfoot inside the schools; the pleasures come from alliances with other parents and makers of non-chemically infused alternative flooring who understand that "green" labeled carpet also presents a surplus waste because the quantity of their contaminants make them unsuitable for recycling.

Interestingly, it may be among those not wedded to or trained for the elite medical specialties that there lies greater openness to listening to vernaculars of chemicalized knowledge. Training those who will pursue careers in nursing and health studies, as well as environmental and occupational health, Grace Lasker and Nancy Simcox's essay in this issue's Lab Meeting speaks to the importance of seeding the curriculum of university chemistry courses with the precautionary principle. Feminist and social justice pedagogies, they argue, offer methods and principles to encourage future chemists to reflect upon the downstream waste chains of their invention of new materials, so as to prioritize better human health outcomes. The optimism of these authors may be a function of starting this reeducation effort with professional careworkers (nurses, public health officials) a population already open-eyed with respect to the underregulated and underestimated impact of chemical pollutants as contributors to chronic disease (see National Conversation on Public Health and Chemical Exposures Leadership Council, 2011).

As the essays of Barba, Grandia, and Lasker and Simcox together indicate, structurally vulnerable communities and their allies in environmental justice work regard preparation for and training at educational institutions as a priority pathway to intervene in settler-colonialist and racialized wars of attrition that occur by chemical proxy. Ironically, as stressed by Ana Soto—whose interview by graduate student researcher at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women Gracen Brilmyer appears in this issue's Lab Meeting—institutions of research and learning are not, themselves, immune from the freely moving operations of roque chemicals (a point also made by Grandia). A key historical event important to the field of endocrine disruption research occurred when cellular, molecular, and developmental biologist Ana Soto and her co-researcher, Carl Sonnenschein, discovered a problem with their laboratory research apparatus—eventually finding out that the manufacturer of a plastic centrifuge tube in which they had stored cell nutrient had made a change in the chemical composition of the containers. Eventually, Soto and Sonnenschein did some reverse engineering to identify nonylphenol as the endocrine disrupter (Soto et al., 1991). In Brilmyer's interview with Soto, who participated in the UCLA Center for the Study of Women symposium in 2017 on the topic of "Chemical Entanglements: Gender and Exposure," Soto reflects on feminism and vernaculars (different languages, metaphor, and conceptual systems) as they shape the questions asked in science and materialize modes of being in the world.

In a related but distinct register, Logan O'Laughlin's article in this special section, "Troubling Figures: Endocrine Disrupters, Intersex Frogs, and the Logics of Environmental Science," also makes the laboratory process its object of analysis, specifically opening up the black box wherein the African clawed frog has become a preferred indicator species for experiments testing for endocrine disruptors. Through careful intersectional analysis of the arduous material construction of the maleness of *Xenopus laevis*, O'Laughlin historicizes not only how these test subjects become animal capital but also how the African origins of this particular species contributes to its nomination as invasive. That nomination also allows for the later resignification by Black chemist Tyrone Hayes of *X. laevis* as a vulnerable "brother" on a continuum with other people of color, who racialized systems of labor exploitation and immigration legislation, render available for chemical exposures in the field (see Barba). O'Laughlin deftly dissects the way in which "slandering rhetoric of non-normative sex organs" operates in the reporting out on test results from toxicological assays vis-à-vis endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Thus, while Hayes and his students pose the question of how it is that the United States thinks its relationality to certain crops overrides the importance of its relationality to farmworkers' health, O'Laughlin implicitly points out that the relationality of endocrine experts to those who identify as intersex, trans, and nonbinary also consistently stays broken and frayed when those who are cis-male or cis-female fail to take into account how hormone interacting chemicals can also be figured as welcome and affirming (see Pollock, 2016).

Finally, in "Chemical Kinship: Interdisciplinary Experiments with Pollution," Angeliki Balayannis and Emma Garnett underscore the need to move past the framing of chemicals as strictly "villainous objects with violent effects" in order to "do/design ethical research with chemicals." In their short piece published as a Critical Commentary in this volume, the authors note that just like "kin, these materials [chemicals] are never entirely good nor bad [;] they can be both enabling and harmful." They draw attention to three projects of "civic science" (Fortun & Fortun, 2005; Wylie, 2018), involving academicians in partnership with community organizations that exemplify innovative ways of working with chemical relations. Two of these projects are defined in relation to geographic regions (Air South Asia and MEXPOS) and one orbits around a disease endpoint (The Asthma Files). These projects help us to "imagine what making good kinship with bad kin might look like." These efforts at practicing STS in a mode of "making and doing" is performed, as well, in The Land and the Refinery project and its Pollution Reporter app organized by Shadaan and Murphy (see their essay in this issue).

# Assemblage III: Vernaculars of Consumption

Three of the essays in this issue's special themed section address the chemical entanglements of "feminine" consumption circuits, in relation to beauty creams, sanitary supplies (menstrual technology), and various body-care and food options scrutinized by pregnant women. Digging through memoranda files newly released from Canada's Department of National Health (DNH), Lara Tessaro tracks the administrative rulings in the 1940s and early 1950s—a period in which estrogen's potency as a drug caused confusion as to the conditions under which it could circulate safely, if at all, as a component of cosmetic creams. Tessaro's "Potency and Power: Estrogen, Cosmetics, and Labeling in Canadian Regulatory Practices, 1939–1953" points out, first, how an omnibus label of "use with care," shifted the burden of safety onto female consumers (to whom these creams were primarily marketed) and acted as an alibi for regulatory institutions like Canada's DNH to forgo setting safety standards. Second, the article traces the way in which, even after the passage of regulatory amendments intended to ensure that hormonecontaining cosmetic products would not circulate if they were shown to have systemic effects, these products were still allowed to be sold and bought. Tessaro details the way in which Canada's DNH seemed mostly to want to avoid adjudicating the mismatch between commercial interests (to infuse emollients with magical properties of youthful regeneration) and scientific studies (which landed on estrogen's systemic effects, rendering any determination of small enough doses impossible) in this period of regulatory indecision over estrogen's potency.

Precautionary consumerism has been critiqued by decolonial feminists as a liberal band-aid that diverts attention from more trenchant, collective interventions aimed at protecting populations made structurally vulnerable to toxic trespasses because of their poverty; racialized minority, immigrant or undocumented status; or Indigenous ties to place, as well as combinations of those factors. Nevertheless, in "Purity Is Not the Point: Chemical Toxicity, Childbearing, and Consumer Politics of Care," birth doula Andrea Ford underscores in her research on childbearing in the San Francisco Bay Area that precautionary consumerism is very much the vernacular through which many pregnant women first express an awakening consciousness to their embeddedness in a "permanently polluted world" (Liboiron, Tironi, & Calvillo, 2018). These women's efforts to buy better on behalf of their progeny-to-be not only suggests their intimations that regulatory bodies, like the EPA, have not done enough in the way of modeling safety to protect newborns, but also witnesses a degree of mainstreaming of endocrine disruption science (the awareness that the old toxicological wisdom of dose making the poison fails in relation to EDCs where the emphasis has turned toward critical windows of exposure—such as in utero—where small dose exposures can make an outsized impact) (Gore et al., 2015; see also Ashford & Miller, 1998). Ford argues, moreover, that "childbearing can be a catalyst for ecological approaches to politics-that is, approaches in which relations of responsibility and vulnerability are foregrounded over individual rights."

#### At the other end of habitual turns toward consumerism practiced in wealthy

nations of the Global North are the circuits of disposal for commodities not fully metabolized in processes of their intended use. In her cross-regional comparative analysis of the handling of menstrual waste, "Compost and Menstrual Blood: Women Waste Pickers and the Work of Waste Futurity," Rachel Vaughn takes a temporally elongated or systems view that dials out toward production design and waste futurity, rather than focusing strictly on the point of consumption. Feminine technologies-those managing the disposal of menses and that would lie adjacent to the uterus—become sites of anxiety regarding contamination by chemical hazards (e.g., possible endocrine disrupters contained in the masking fragrances added to sanitary napkins and tampons, and carcinogens like dioxin, a by-product of bleaching processes that whiten absorption materials). Attuning to those anxieties, eco-feminist entrepreneurs based in the Global North have taken a twofold tactic: redesigning menstrual technologies using, for instance, organic cotton in tampons so as to appeal to "green" consumers and working to destigmatize menstrual bleeding overall. In contrast, campaigns around menstrual waste launched by labor unions of SWaCH (Solid Waste Collection and Handling) in India, forward a vernacular of "dignity" in their campaigns to highlight waste picking as recycling work that necessitates labeling with a red dot disposal bags containing absorptive materials filled with menstrual waste. The Red Dot Campaign allows waster pickers to decide how to handle (or avoid) such bags unopened, but also extends narratives of uterine blood discharge as health hazard. Noting the contradictions in these positions, Vaughn wonders after what kind of feminist approach to menstrual waste could forge a bridge between these distinctly situated stakeholders.

# Assemblage IV: Cognizing Chemicals through Aesthetics

The two pieces comprising this subsection proceed by way of reflecting upon and revising sensory systems of aesthetic persuasion. Key to the science and technology engagement in disability blogger Peggy Munson's poem, "Paean to Bicillin L-A ® and the End of Harry Harlow's Rhesus Monkey Experiments" (hereafter "Paean") featured as this volume's Critical Perspective, is its citation of Vorticism, an artistic movement of the 1910s associated with Wyndham Lewis and his "belief that artists should observe the energy of modern society as if from a still point at the center of a whirling vortex." It was related to the artistic movement of the Italian Futurists, enamored with the dynamism, speed, and forces of industrialized modernity.

Munson has been an activist in the Chronic Fatigue Immune Deficiency Syndrome (CFIDS) and Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) communities for close to two decades.<sup>19</sup> Her "Paean's" vortex appears both as a swirling, recombinant style and

as a specific historical reference to an EF4 tornado that swept through Washington, Illinois, in 2013, killing three people and destroying over a thousand homes.<sup>20</sup> As a cartoonist will often draw a tornado as a tight spiral that widens out into a tangle of swirls, "Paean" imitates the intensity of motion—the sweeping up of ordered (white-picketed) dwellings into a chaos of proximity—to suggest bonds of relatedness among a host of seemingly unrelated actors: white settler residents of the US prairie who live on a "hard-fracked hem" of earth where hazardous chemicals have been pumped into the soil (leaching into wells and groundwater to work their slow poisonings; see Wylie, 2018); those in the deep south, northeast, and Great Lakes regions, neuro-affected by combinations of pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals, and parasitic spirochetes; and those made worse, or at least not made better, by clinicians and scientists curious to see the results of withholding palliative medications and tactile comfort from primate species.<sup>21</sup>

If early twentieth-century Futurism oriented towards both fascism and the idealization of human-harnessed mechanical forces (tied to the combustion of carbon-rich chemicals),<sup>22</sup> the swirling style of Munson's poem recognizes, as a perhaps greater primeval force, not only the "felt" pressure associated with air shears, weather, and human touch but also a host of animate agencies from below—and of those laid low with fatigue. Those animacies (Chen, 2012) include the penicillium mold's capacity to produce mycotoxins—from which humankind has derived antibiotics such as the long-lasting bicillin of the poem's title. And they also include the vorticist action of the CFIDS poet's "chemical enfleshment" inseparable from her neuro-Lyme "alterlife" (Murphy 2017a, 2017b). Munson's poem metaphorically asks why it is that we underestimate care work through touch, the companionate dwelling beside (and bedside) the disabled, as a crucial feature necessary to surviving the wake of modernization's turbulence.

While Munson revises vorticist style for purposes of twenty-first-century bonding—that is, that which a sustainable (rather than fascist) futurity depends— Allison Morgan and Kim Fortun begin their essay with a reproduction of Jasper Johns's *Flag (Moratorium)* (1969), which renders the US's Stars and Stripes in green, black, and orange (complementary colors to red, white, and blue). After staring at Johns's piece, a sighted individual can look at a grey background and see the afterimage of the US flag, now perceived with the original colors. This afterimage is both perceptible and immaterial (a function of optical memory). For Morgan and Fortun, the "flickering" afterimage metaphorizes the toggling between knowing and uncertainty that results from former soldiers' processing many different kinds of news and data sources—public journalism, veteran group web pages, denial of coverage from the Veterans Administration and Department of Defense—that variously affirm and deny the reality of their toxicant related illnesses.

Morgan and Fortun's "Toxic Soldiers, Flickering Knowledge, and Enlisted Care: Dispossession and Environmental Injustice" focuses on US military veterans with chronic illnesses tied to service in Vietnam, the Gulf War, and deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Curious as to why veterans of the recent wars in Irag and Afghanistan, who claim chronic illnesses due to the toxicant emissions from burn pits, compare themselves more readily to the "Agent Orange guys" rather than the more geographically and temporally proximate veterans of the Gulf War, the authors hear the following explanation from a leader of a prominent advocacy group: "Everyone knows that Agent Orange was a giant cover-up. The government decided to spray even when they had evidence it was harmful. Burn pits are the same thing." State institutions charged with protecting the health and wellbeing of its citizens ignore or actively suppress information that could have been used to maintain health, precisely because the revelations of this information could be too costly to industry and government. Agent Orange, in short, is a code word for the amplified injury that comes when government and industry continue "hiding the truth," as one veteran puts it, regarding both immediate and transgenerational disablements from chemical toxicants.

In the phrase, "If you think they were hiding the truth from us about it during the war, just look at how they're hiding the truth from us [now]," a veteran intimates that tactics of cover-up have gotten more sophisticated over time, even as he may not have dialed into the complexity of what Sara Wylie (2018)—with regard to the fracking industry-calls "enclaving tactics" that sequester "information, spaces, and peoples" (loc. 445), making it difficult to aggregate all the intelligence needed to get a ruling against the agents causing harm (often private entities-oilfield services companies or private military contractors). Morgan and Fortun point to Agent Orange, then, as an umbrella figuration bespeaking serial chemical exposures specific to US soldiers and the subsequent "cover-ups"-obstructed information needed by veterans in their attempt to get covered care. This reference to Agent Orange returns us to this Introduction's emphasis on ecocide with an additional psychic twist. Agent Orange might constitute part of the vernacular of our toxicant times, bespeaking chemically delivered disablements coupled by amplified psychic and material trauma that occurs upon realizing that the institutions supposed to protect against harms—or to which to appeal for restitution when harms have occurred—are in bed with and/or are selfsame with the agents of harm. Johns's artwork (with its green and orange hues) might also be considered a chemicalized figuration-an Agent Green and Orange-that

affirms, parallel to the operations of the vortex in Munson's poem, the unconscious (not quite conscious) cognizing modes solicited by artwork that aid in moving research from a position fixated on warding off further toxicant harms toward a position that builds alternative disability care networks led by those already disabled.

## On Toxicant Reckoning in a Depressive-Reparative Mode

To return to my opening paragraphs on ecocide and its mystifyingly restricted labeling in the 1970s as a crime in war but not as a crime when done within a nation's borders, I would return to my earlier claim regarding how that mystification works on a psychic and moral level. To recap, restricting ecocide to a crime only when carried out during the course of a declared international war operates to normalize (and thereby quell legitimate outrage at) industry's theft of the atmospheric and hydrological commons—using those planetary regions as if they were private garbage dumps. The agro and petro industries, which benefit from this "border-wall thinking" (to recall my earlier phrasing), mobilize various practices to extend this mystification including informational enclaving, public relations campaigns (DuPont's "Better Things for Better Living...Through Chemistry"), tactics of diversion and incitement of doubt (Oreskes and Conway, 2010), and the undermining of scientific independence of regulatory agencies, to name a few strategies. If, at this current historical moment, there appears heightened awareness about our "permanently polluted world" (and climate change as an articulation of one of the effects of that pollution), does this herald a waning of the hegemonic idea (Gramsci, 1971) of chemicalized modernity—that is, the equation of modern living with a chemicalized "prosperity" (of intensive farming, fossil fuel extraction, incorporation into global supply-finance-debt chains, digital communications and its toxicant e-waste, and so forth)? And if so, should we be mindful that hegemonies don't simply go gently into that good night, but are often succeeded by often oppressive acts meant to reassert dominance over-rather than lead with the consent of-the governed? Whichever way we speculate answers to those questions, the call to action in the present may involve building spaces and channels for supporting what Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo (2018) have called "hypo-interventions" and "slow activism," which accords with action in a depressive-reparative mode.

As suggested in this Introduction's subtitle, the tenor of these pieces might be described as "depressive-reparative" in the sense outlined by the late queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003), who differentiated that mood of cognizing (i.e., thinking-feeling) from a paranoid disposition.<sup>23</sup> Lamenting the homogeneity of a large amount of critical theory—operating to expose the hidden interests behind

cultural productions and processes (via a hermeneutics of suspicion)—Sedgwick drew upon the work of Melanie Klein and Sylvan Tomkins to mine alternatives toward these critical habits of paranoia that ramp up anxiety and are primarily oriented toward warding off harm (or testifying to harm, cf. Tuck, 2013). To be clear, there is psychic reward to staying in the paranoid position, even as it is riven with anxiety. That is, at least, one *knows* about the uncaring disposition of the state-corporate-carceral-imperialist nexus and will not be surprised by its continued deprivations. However, because the paranoid disposition is so subsumed by warding off negative affects (humiliation, pain, harm), the paranoid psyche cannot fathom the possibility of seeking positive affects.

The reparative mode, in Sedqwick's (2003) articulation, is an achieved position that attempts to ask what pleasures and desires might be pursued if one could move orthogonal to the habit of preempting harm.<sup>24</sup> It is from the depressive position that there might emerge a reparative turn toward hope (and vulnerability) to surprises in the future: "Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned [actant] tries to organize the fragments...she encounters or creates" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 146). Action in a depressive-reparative mode begins articulating the joy in caring for others and seeks out the affordances and capacities of those who have been harmed, not to excuse the state-industry nexus but also not to buttress its power by looking to it as the sole or primary source of remedy. Such pleasures afforded to and by crip people of color who "dream disability justice" through their own care work for each other have been lyrically expressed recently by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha (2018). Such pleasures also live in cover artist's Jes Fan's affinal deployment of estrogen cream for purposes of reparatively materializing "epidermal" as modifier of kinship qua felt relationality rather than of racism qua broken relationality, practiced as the visual profiling and surveillance of people of color to white supremacist ends.

Returning to Sedgwick, some will recall that this formidable literary scholar wrote her essay on paranoia, and depressive-reparative alternatives, as a means of contemplating queer kinship in a time of proliferating HIV/AIDS and with respect to her own breast cancer diagnosis. <sup>24</sup> Key to her desire to reorient her own and others' scholarship toward a different way of thinking-feeling were her reflections on her regular close contact with two disabled friends—one of whom was HIV positive. Her other friend, Sedgwick (2003) noted, was ill with "advanced cancer caused by a massive environmental trauma (basically, he grew up on top of a toxic waste site)" (p. 149). Toxicant reckoning—the grappling with the defilement of relations of land-water-air-and-body through chemical hazards—happens, too, in the syntax of this sentence where "massive environmental trauma" mutes the criminality—the excessive war-like aggression of ecocide—more clearly conveyed in the parenthetical. The vernacular of the depressive reparative, in short, has its genealogies, too, in a lattice of chemicalized relations. This special issue on Chemical Entanglements challenges us to maintain, remember, and materialize epidermal openness to disabled kin, to those structurally positioned as proximate to toxicant risks, as "pleasure and nourishment" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137) even in environments with both bad and good systems as also our kin (our responsibility).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Martin (2008), "The U.S. military sprayed approximately 11–12 million gallons of Agent Orange over nearly 10% of then-South Vietnam between 1961 and 1971. One scientific study estimated that between 2.1 million and 4.8 million Vietnamese were directly exposed to Agent Orange. Vietnamese advocacy groups claim that there are over 3 million Vietnamese suffering from health problems caused by exposure to the dioxin in Agent Orange" (p. ii).

<sup>2</sup> Decades later, the Scottish attorney Polly Higgins took up the mantle of ecocide, attempting to incorporate laws to protect the earth's interests in the Rome statutes, the code establishing an international criminal court. Arguing that because corporate governance makes CEOs accountable to stockholders (i.e., it prioritizes the maximization of their investment returns), Higgins explained that this financial infrastructure assured that short-term profits would be favored over long-term stewardship of resources for future use or gain. (See <a href="https://ecocidelaw.com/about-polly/.">https://ecocidelaw.com/about-polly/.</a>) Saying that the earth needs a good lawyer, Higgins made clear that the voice of "self-interest" had become narrowed to the language of finances (two-, five-, and ten-year gains and losses), a calculus in which the unrecognized (and certainly unwaged and underreproduced) ecological

wealth of earth, water, air, alongside the manifold creatures coexisting, supported in, and transforming these spaces/places, was regarded as a never-ending box of treasures—supporting human life and, somehow not needing its own replenishments.

<sup>3</sup>The Geneva Conventions contain a protocol banning from international conflict the use of "asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials or devices" as well as biological weapons. While the United States was a signatory to the protocol in 1925, the US Congress did not ratify the protocol until 1975. The Kennedy administration interpreted the Geneva Protocol not to apply to tear gas and herbicides. The conventions have been interpreted also to not apply to instances where states' "security forces" internally police civilians within a nation.

<sup>4</sup> Galston went on to stress that annually green plants convert "without fanfare" 700 billion tons of carbon dioxide, produce 500 billion tons of plant material potentially consumable by man, and release 500 billion tons of oxygen for the "respiration of man and almost all forms of life" (US Congress Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1972, p. 326).

<sup>5</sup>There may exist more blatant outrage, recognition, and protest (perhaps because anti-war sentiments mobilize many kinds of actors) when ecocidal acts toxicant release into the commons—are framed as explicit war tactics. Put another way, if corporations, whose stockholders reside primarily in global metropolises, are the ones committing ecocidal acts in Ogoni-land (Nigeria), the Ecuadorian Amazon, or Bhopal, India, no nation is at fault for such so-called accidents, even though the poisonings that do occur are eminently predictable.

<sup>6</sup> It would be a mistake to construe Galson as an apologist for industrial pollutants. At a 1970 conference called War Crimes and the American Conscience, where he coined the term *ecocide*, Galston noted that "most highly developed nations have already committed autoecocide over large parts of their own countries" (quoted in Zierler, 2011, p. 19). Galston seems to have been keen both to distance his own expertise from what he perceived as the "dilettant[ism]" and unscientific "kook[iness]" of popular environmentalism (Zierler 2011, p. 18), and to consider, as a graver moral crime, ecocide when "committed [by one nation, the USA] against another country" than when the US committed it against itself (Zierler 2011, p. 19). To complicate matters further, in the context of the US, it is impossible to differentiate what is autoecocide and what is part of three centuries of Anglo-European ecocidal warfare on Indigenous sovereign lands in the

#### Americas.

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, the US's propping up of autocrat foreign leaders (Wylie, 2018, loc 6210-6221; Mitchell 2009) has been part of the militarized strategy of oil and petroleum extraction.

<sup>8</sup> "War by chemical proxy" is the term used by the Kennedy administration in its first phase of undeclared military actions in Vietnam/Indochina prior to 1965.

<sup>9</sup> My use of the term *relationality* is informed by Jessica Kolopenuk's (2020) "Miskâsowin: Indigenous Science, Technology, and Society." See also Gerlach (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Fascinated with material trans-formations, Jes Fan speaks of his training in glass-making as key to both his apprehension of the liveliness of inorganic art materials and his inspiration to draw out the transformative capacities of other media—including his own fleshy matter (Jes Fan In Flux | Art 21, 2019). Performing his own gender transition as a combination of molecular and behavioral applications (masculinizing through cutaneous testosterone and learning to box), Fan compares himself to both the sculptor carving out a solid form and "glass in [its] liquid [state]...perpetually in flux." To be clear, Fan has not framed his transition as one of his art projects. Instead, the experience of transitioning influenced the biomaterials—for example, testosterone and melanin—that Fan began incorporating into his art practice. See Jes Fan In Flux | Art 21 (2019).

<sup>11</sup> *Mother Is a Woman* is also the name of the mock commercial product the video infomercial sells. See Fan (2018).

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Ari Heinrich for his gorgeous experimental glossary that is "coenmeshed" with Fan's work. Heinrich explores the role that speculative figurings of melanin's future by queer artists of color play in resisting the machine of capitalism and environmental devastation. See his forthcoming *Decolonial Melanin: Jes Fan's Contagious Xenophoria (A Glossary)*, funded by the 2019 Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant.

<sup>13</sup> I use "feminization" here to echo the phrasing in *Mother Is a Woman*: "Freshly harvested from a single source origin, [*Mother Is a Woman*] invites you to be feminized by my mother." According to recent research, estrogen masculinizes the brain—a finding that unsettles lay notions of estrogen as strictly that which feminizes. Specifically, testosterone is converted at specific local sites in the brain by aromatase into estrogen; this estrogen promotes a density of cell growth particularly in the medial pre-optic area of the brain, with "the density of one type of brain cell in [this area]...twice as great in males as it is in females" (Davis 2015). <sup>14</sup> "Lattice" is the term Fan uses to describe the system of conduit (modeled in rectilinear connective fashion) upon which glass orbs are propped and from which they hang in the artwork featured on this issue's cover, *Systems II* ("Jes Fan in Flux").

<sup>15</sup> On epidermal racism, see Lee 2014, pp. 52–57. At the 2015 Technoscience Salon at the University of Toronto, I had the pleasure of hearing Vanessa Agard-Jones introduce her work on chlordecone in Martinique using the framework of "chemical kin" (see also Agard-Jones 2016). "Chemical kinship" is also the title of an essay by Bayalaniss and Garnett in this volume.

<sup>16</sup> I expand the meaning of *vernaculars* beyond vocal expressions to include quotidian practices and habits. Listening to vernaculars recognizes what I call visceral and decolonial knowledge from below, a locational modifier referring to a political-economic positioning, placing these populations proximal and others more distal, to the disabling effects of chemical pollutants.

<sup>17</sup> While Lago Agrio residents obtained a legal judgement of US\$9.5 billion against Chevron (which acquired Texaco's holding) in an Ecuadorian court, no monies have been paid out, as Chevron continues to contest the judgment itself as corrupt. The importance of listening to vernaculars of loss, however, goes beyond this particular historical instance of stalled monetary judgement. As Waichee Dimock (1997) argues in Residues of Justice, the US justice system relies upon an erroneous but convenient logic of adequation. What does that mean? Where across two languages there exist no cognate term for the idea or word one would translate, that translator reaches for a metaphor that would approximate the meaning of the original term. Even so, a residue of untranslatability remains. For humanists, this lack of adequation—here, a one-to-one (terminological) correspondence—can inspire creativity, prompting the translator to weave more poetic figures which constitute inexact but possibly delightful substitutions. Bringing these insights on language to the courts, Dimock argues that American justice (both in civil and criminal suits) relies upon the dream of the fullness of adequation for a set of losses—such as, Lidia's three miscarriages and the intensity of her intermittent but chronic pain (*tsaac!*)—by some monetary sum. But the eventual settlement intended to bring closure, even when finally paid out, Dimock argues, will prove anything but settling; for what is deeply unsatisfactory, in the end, is the idea that a species of commerce (the language of US\$) can pay

for (is equivalent to) the destruction of a mode of living, which is to say, the reckless contamination of soil, water, forest, and bodies effected by Texaco/Chevron. In short, listening carefully to the residues contained in these vernaculars becomes very much a part of assisting in the ongoing project of justice.

<sup>18</sup> At the time of Grandia's submission of her original essay, the story of collective carework to improve ventilation and removal of intoxicating sources from elementary school indoor spaces looked like it would be one of "slow activism" (Liboiron. Tironi, & Calvillo, 2018); as we've wended our way through production, changes on the ground have rewritten the ending of this story for now as a victory.

<sup>19</sup> See her anthology *Stricken: Voices from the Hidden Epidemic of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* (2000).

<sup>20</sup> EF refers to the Enhanced Fujita tornado damage scale; EF4 means winds speeds of 207 to 260 mph and "devastating" damage such as "blown down" buildings (Storm Prediction Center, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Munson references Harry Harlow's monkeys, the Black men of Tuskegee, and the speaker who cannot get insurance approved access to the expensive drug, Bicillin LA (LA = long-acting).

<sup>22</sup> Though space constraints prevent a fuller analysis, let me just note here that a "molecular feminist's" (Roy, 2018) reconsideration of the Futurists might frame their enchantment with representing force and dynamism equated with symbols of fossil-fueled locomotion—motor boats, trains, industrial gears—as a fascination and fetishization of energies released through the literal *breaking of highly stable bonds* on the molecular level. Thanks, here, to Anne Pollock's verbal account of the energies released from molecules with extremely tight bonds.

<sup>23</sup> Sedgwick described paranoia as a theory of negative affects that places faith in exposure (in the dynamic of hidden-shown). Seeking positive affects is necessary to cultivate reparative energy.

<sup>24</sup> It is from the depressive position that a reparative energy might emerge. The reparatively positioned scholar, ally, maker-doer, and canary surrenders the outraged position of (full well-)knowing for the depressive position (which still has knowledge but realizes its insufficiencies). Knowledge is not the fortress or shield

one had hoped; and the problem may be with the whole concept of fortress immunity.

<sup>25</sup> The peak years of death from HIV/AIDS were 1995 for the United States and 2005 globally. Sedgwick published her essay on paranoia in 2003.

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# THE ANCESTRAL TURN

#### Against speculative genealogies, towards critical kinships

#### BY DAVID XU BORGONJON

It takes a medium to contact the ancestors. Yen-Chao Lin's video short The Spirit Keepers of Makuta'ay (2019), shot on hand-processed Super-8 film in traditionally Amis territory on the east coast of Taiwan over the course of a residency, records these moments of spiritual mediation. Lin, a Montreal/Tiohtià:ke-based artist of Taiwanese descent, has long pursued the crafts that allow you to know by touch the hard-to-see, like water dowsing, spirit possession, and kau chim (bamboo slip divination). Her video is overlaid with the voice of textile artist and community organizer Rara Dongi, as she narrates in both Mandarin and Amis the changes she has witnessed in the community. Scenes of medicinal herbs and joss-money-burning in ritual preparations lead into quasi-ethnographic footage of Daoist possession, Christian sacrament, and Amis sorcery. The entire video is streaked with the burns and crackles of chemical developer and interspersed with cyanotype drawing experiments.

Lin's video, as well as her practice at large, raiseswithout resolving-the question of how exactly to draw the line between medium, as in specificity, and medium, as in spirit. If the ancestors were to speak to us, over what network and with what kinds of interference would their signals carry? Lin is one of a number of artists whose work begins to offer answers by aiming to reclaim inheritances-often in the form of cultural practices-that have been erased, stolen, or suppressed by settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Given that the racialized East Asian body-whether understood in the Americas as model minorities, or in Asia as the "natives" of ethno-nationalist states such as Japan, the Koreas, or China-interlocks into the modern history of displacement and dispossession not just as victims but also as agents, I would like to venture a guess at the stakes and limits of an aesthetic that we can term the "ancestral turn" within transpacific capitalism.

Ancestors who are too close by are a nuisance, a terror, a fact of life, and a consideration in the distribution of power. It is only once the "immigrant" (a codeword for minority settlers in racial states) has strayed outside their ambit of power-capital doesn't care about the pedigree of racialized laborers in the West, so long as they can work-that their ancestors can become a subject for art. Their ancestors are interesting, in this context of displacement, because they are irrelevant. It echoes what scholar David L. Eng and psychoanalyst Shinhee Han term in their research on Asian American college students "racial melancholia": the incomplete mourning for both an irretrievable Asian authenticity and an impossible assimilation into whiteness. In other words, the ancestral turn is also a diasporic return. As the rhetoric of ancestry circulates



YEN-CHAO LIN, The Spirit Keepers of Makuta'ay, 2019, still from single-channel video with color and sound: 10 min 57 sec. Courtesy the artist. between states and spaces, in the name of culture, and on the power of race, it transforms from a social practice into an aesthetic mode and, maybe, even into contradictory politics.

The ancestral turn does not necessarily trace biological lineage, but more often recovers those with similar experiences. It tracks not entitlements conferred by descent but techniques of survival honed by oppression. When designer ET Chong states, as part of a series of events held at the nonprofit space Recess Art in Brooklyn, New York, "our ancestors were queer as fuck," he is not stating a biological fact, but making a historical intervention. He is protesting the interruption of intergenerational connections in queer and trans communities of color: some ancestors are not assigned at birth, but made. Genealogy in feminist, queer, and trans art often works as an anti-oppressive technique precisely because it speculates beyond the rubric of the biopolitical family. The problem is that this form of speculation almost always relies on and reifies a vague thing called culture.

Consider ancestral rhetoric in artist Wu Tsang's project *Duilian* (2016). In 2017, she invited the Hong Kong art community to join her in burning joss for the revolutionary and (arguably) queer poet Qiu Jin. Using what host organization Spring Workshop described at the time as "Chinese practices of ancestral mourning," this event inscribed Qiu Jin into a speculative genealogy of queer life, and named Wu as her descendant. In the film component of this project, Wu's partner and

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collaborator boychild played Qiu Jin while she played Qiu's intimate friend, calligrapher Wu Zhiying. In an ArtAsiaPacific review published online in 2016, Michele Chan commented that, "while the film has been accused by some of orientalization and speculative queering of the 'other,' Tsang's defense for Duilian might be that it does so consciously and unapologetically." Along what line of reasoning, if not the patri-line, did Wu Tsang claim Qiu Jin as an ancestor and understand herself as a descendant? Does the mourning of Qiu Jin reify a certain idea of what it is to be a Chinese woman and a national hero who is commemorated in official Chinese Communist Party and Kuomintang history—a gesture that in Hong Kong today seems far more fraught? We should be wary of espousing a culture in which projects of dispossession, whether in Xinjiang, the New Territories, or the United States, are carried out.

It is precisely because the marginalized aren't always able to trace their ancestry that genealogy can be a productive space for new identifications. But a purely speculative approach will often end up using the same old categories. We find ourselves settling for cultural heritage-the consolation prize of the materially dispossessed and the absolving salve of the complicit settler. Against this background, I want to plead for a materialist approach that looks at histories of dispossession and processes of dis-identification, where the ancestral turn takes root not in the vagaries of culture but the specificities of family.

In New York-based artist Taehee Whang's video Walking to My Grandfather's Mound (2019), a narrator engages in a quixotic attempt to visit their grandfather's grave through Google Maps Streetview. This quest unfolds as a dense moving collage that includes screenshots, sappy charcoal drawings of stylized cartoon figures and faces, and found footage of family memorials. Over this collage, a text set in the typography of a role-playing game reflects, "In order to recall you, my grief has to be gendered. / I'm not your eldest son, how do I access your archive? I'm not your daughter, how do I sound my loss?"

Whereas Whang is most interested in the techniques of making images, Jes Fan has dedicated himself to examining the biological, medical, and political

TAEHEE WHANG, Walking to My Grandfather's Mound, 2019, still from singlechannel video: 4 min 17 sec Courtesy the artist.

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processes by which bodies are made. For the project Mother is a Woman, which originated as a performance at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery in 2018 and is exhibited as a video-a work whose title undoes a cis dogma through repeating it—Fan mixed a moisturizing lotion using estrogen pulled from the urine of his mother. He then invited others to apply it. As the milky emulsion seeped into the skin, the audience members absorbed a gendered form of relation. In this experiment, kinship is rethought not without biology but within it.

Even though women, and mothers in particular, are seen as the repository of cultural knowledge (like hand-me-downs, old recipes, ancestral wisdom) they are often excluded from the processes of inheritance. Consider the collective writing project—three volumes of which have already been published—Writing Mothers (2017-), organized by artist Huang Jingyuan and curator Wang Yamin through an open invitation to reflect on mothering as social labor in a sequence of Wechat groups. Huang defends the need for critical self-reflection—"this capacity is our right"—and goes on to observe that in this world, "the models, procedures, and protocols that represent our emotions have arrived earlier than our emotions themselves." Frustration, resentment, and other affects in search of political definition take the form of ghosts in the Asian-American diaspora and haunt the controlled online spaces of the chat group. (A thought: ghosts are pre-political affects, while ancestors are political bodies.)

I am skeptical of the attempt to salvage alternative ways of life from this thing called tradition. I know that I may be so haunted by postsocialism that I am insensate to other ghosts. The ugly words "feudal superstition" were never far from my mind in this writing. Against the liberal promise that everyone is born equal, the ancestral turn represents an emergent consensus that all forms of knowing are embodied in ways that are gendered, raced, classed, abled-and inherited. It is in this context that American artist Carolyn Lazard, in their essay "The World Is Unknown," published by Triple Canopy in April, calls for a broad range of alternative modes of care that unsettle both the positivism and dogmatic materialism of biomedicine, as well as the fantasies of New Age self-help (read: a

> delusional, Orientalist culturalism). This multiplication of practices will inevitably test the critic's knowledge of art-historical signifiers and astrological signs.

> What does "preparing to be a good ancestor," in the words of American artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden, mean within transpacific capitalism today? At the least, the search for such ancestors must be self-critical, wary of state ethnonationalisms on the one hand and settler-diasporic liberalisms on the other. It must attend to both birthrights and birthwrongs. In examining and using our inherited privileges-citizenship or residency status, language fluencies, accumulated capital, forms of genetically determined health, for example-our task is to confront not our ancestors but our relatives. In the process, we create new relations.

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Tao Hui, *An interview with Leng Shuihua, writer of The History of Southern Drama*, 2018, video, color, sound, 10 minutes 46 seconds. From "In My Room."

### **"In My Room"** ANTENNA SPACE 天綫空間

Autofiction, as a genre, has sought to burn the safety blanket of detachment that poets and novelists often hide under, positing instead an authorial "I" that is very much "me," but presenting occurrences that may or may not be factual. One of the landmarks of autofiction, Guillaume Dustan's 1998 novel In My Room, brought its author instant notoriety for its (self-) portrayal of drug-fucked faggotry in mid-1990s Paris. Scenes drift from the eponymous bedroom to the darkroom and to the dance floors of Le Queen, a world of almost totally impassive hedonism, where happiness comes in forms that can either be snorted or inserted in the rectum.

"In My Room," curated by Alvin Li, took Dustan's novel as a curatorial jumping-off point, a chance to gather a selection of work by artists similarly treading the pathway between the quotidian and the psychopathological, giving the diaristic full bleed. In *An interview with Leng Shuihua, writer of The History of Southern Drama*, 2018, video artist Tao Hui stages a fictional literary scandal in the form of a dramatic television interview with the reclusive author of an unpublished novel that nonetheless managed to spawn six successful films. As the interview unravels, it is revealed that the manuscript was originally written as a "confession of love" to a film producer who then hijacked the work and capitalized upon it. Tao's twochannel video work Double Talk, 2018, imagines a suicided K-pop star returned to life; on one screen, a television film crew follows him around, recording his poetic ruminations and reminiscences, while, on the other, students watch the same footage, their teacher standing at the front of the class occasionally barking out commentary: "You have to believe in your own performance." Bruno Zhu's *Falling Stars*, 2015–19, is an ensemble of sixteen sculptures in chicken wire, the surfaces of which feature a blown-up photograph of Zhu's eight-year-old sister's smiling face. Zhu arrived at the sculptures' forms through a performance in which he instructed dancers to hug the image, thus leaving an imprint of their bodies in the sculpted sheets. Imbued with the touch of others, the rosy hue of the photograph looks, from a distance, like bits of flesh, crumpled up and discarded.

Skin was also on the mind of Jes Fan, whose "Diagram" series, 2018–, is inspired by clinical depictions of the epidermis, that outermost layer of skin that accounts for the vast majority of differences in human skin color. Fan's wall sculpture *Diagram VI*, 2018, eloquently described by Li as a "living shelf," is in fact two shelves connected with slithering, vine-like piping and balanced by two transparent glass orbs. Fan's *I think about Lam Qua everyday III*, 2019, named after a nineteenth-century painter who specialized in Western-style oil portraits of patients with large tumors and other medical deformities, also features a potato-shaped glass orb, but this one contains specks of color. It is elevated on a plinth and surrounded by a stack of Plexiglas panels that resemble an architectural model.

"You can change any part of your body into a dream," avers the narrator of Evelyn Taocheng Wang's *Hospital Conversations*, 2018, a poignant montage of sound and image that hallucinogenically melds the architecture of a hospital interior with that of the human body. The show also included three pieces from Wang's ongoing series "Eight Views of Oud-Charlois," begun in 2018. A riff on a famous lost scroll painting from the eleventh century, *Eight Views of Xiaoxian*, the series comprises diaristic drawings depicting scenes from Rotterdam's poverty-stricken neighborhood Oud-Charlois, known as the worst ghetto in the Netherlands, where the artist has made her home.

In the dimly lit environs of the gallery, these works and others communed and dilated, inflowing snatches of life that felt like self-contained journeys, intrusions into private meanings made public, turned outward. Understanding is a lifework. Discovery entails confusion, unbecoming. The irresolute nature and vulnerability of so many of the works in this show endowed them with a strength of purpose that made "In My Room" worth revisiting.

— Travis Jeppesen

Mariano Lopez Seoane "< Camp Fires. The Body as Queer Stage> en UV Estudios, Buenos Aires, Argentina", Terremoto, September 2019



### «Camp Fires. The Body as Queer Stage» en UV Estudios, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Por Mariano Lopez Seoane Buenos Aires, Argentina

September 27, 2019 – October 19, 2019



Installation view, Camp Fires, curated by Kerry Doran, Violeta Mansilla and Simon Wursten Marín, at UV Estudios, Buenos Aires. Photo: UV Estudios & Santiago Ortí. © Jacolby Satterwhite. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Camp Fires is one of those exhibitions that, literally, cannot be experienced without a map. In the domestic space of UV, which tends to turn towards the intimate, 16 video works from different parts of the globe are piled up, occupying every last corner. Gender Conscious Free Nail Art Tutorial, by Emilio Bianchic, hovers over the bathroom mirror on the second floor, inviting a strabismic contemplation, divided between the reflection itself and the artist's tribute to makeup. American Reflexxx, by Signe Pierce and Alli Coates, hides in a tiny room that enhances the feeling of suffocation created by the work: a home video that follows the geographical and post-situational dérive of a non-gender character without a face, through the commercial area of an anonymous city in the USA. And thus follows, on the stairs, going through the stair breaks and even on the terrace, from where it is projected on a remote wall, the crossing of virtual imagination and videogames proposed by Jacolby Satterwhite.

The profuse room text prepared to guide the viewer includes a numbered blueprint. This "map" is also a confession: the curators set out to create a world map of the existing video that inevitably is a map of the existing video of the world. Whole. The global ambition of the show is announced from the playful English in the title.

Latin American history authorizes us, when it does not encourage us, to exercise suspicion against everything that is presented as "global", one that at times borders on paranoia. A paranoia justified by the painful succession of colored lenses, pulverized dreams and various forms of fraud and violence familiar to this geography. It's not surprising that caution abounds when traveling through an exhibition such as Camp Fires, a compendium that brings together works produced in such distant places, and contexts as diverse as Mexico, Uruguay, China, USA and Kuwait. How can they even coexist in the same place, the suspicious spectator wonders, the parody of certain Islamic traditions proposed by Fatima Al Qadiri and the revaluation of a pre-colonial Mexican mascot courtesy of Javier Ocampo, with the hedonistic burst in Fire Island that documents, or imposts, the House of Ladosha? The most politicized decree without major procedures that this meeting can only take place under the regime imposed by the imperial eye, more penetrating and fearsome than Sauron's eye of fire. That these works are only possible due to the effective existence of an empire is something that is beyond doubt. What, with candor, we call "globalization" has provided these artists with the bare elements to produce their works: video cameras or mobile phones produced by international corporations, of course, but also the inclusion, sought or not, in the "contemporary art" system, which has a whole series of norms and protocols that allow for creation, and above all, the reading of these works. There is another global element without which this exhibition would not be possible: the experience, and the sensitivity, which the curators call queer, and which, as these works confirm, have long since surpassed the confines of their cradle in the metropolises of the white North to spread across territories of different colors, not always modern and not always urban. We know: queer —and the multiple voices and dissidences that it encapsulates—is one of the linguas francas of this battered empire, but no less effective for it, that begins after the end of the Second World War.

It has been discussed to exhaustion in activist, academic and artistic circles whether this term—and the political and theoretical perspective that it founded-can be used in other contexts without bending over the colonial offensive of which, whether they want it or not, all products that reach us from the USA participate. The benefit of the doubt arises from the detour that the term takes from its origin: gueer, and everything that it encapsulates, was redefined in the North in the late 1980s as an expression of a dissidence; furthermore, it is subversion and militant political opposition. Similar to the dissident ancestry the term camp has, which knew how to name the capacity of different persecuted and silenced communities to play with the dominant and exclusive cultural codes, to re-signify them, and thus, make them function as weapons in the struggle for survival. This is the meaning that Kerry Doran, Violeta Mansilla, and Simon Wursten Marín rescue for their global mapping, reminding us that the history of colonial rule is also the history of the multiple forms of dissidence with respect to the moral and aesthetic norms imposed, and that the international expansion of capital has been answered at different times with a strengthening of internationalism, notorious in the Communist International. Thus, Doran, Mansilla, and Wursten Marín could say, paraphrasing Marx, that the queer spectrum travels the world. Or, better yet, that it sets it on fire, as the title of the exhibition suggests, that it shakes camp's drowsiness—in the year of its institutionalization in the MET and its peak in mass-circulation—to open it to new uses, new intonations, new secret codes.

The camp fire, the fire, as a meeting place and a space to strengthen ties, is the ideal place to produce this displacement. And this exhibition wants to be a fire in at least two ways. On one hand, it wants to function as a meeting point for names, trajectories, cultures, languages and diverse genres. A space of cohabitation, sometimes forced, of artists and works that in many cases their faces have not been seen. And like every collective exhibition, Camp Fires proposes an art of combination and stakes all on the sparks that this chaotic and friendly coexistence can produce. We are then faced with an "open" exhibition, whose definitive figure depends largely on alchemical processes—of attraction and rejection—difficult to predict. And it is noteworthy that the curators want to take this opening and this indeterminacy to its final consequences, radicalizing the declaration at this conventional level—institutionalized until nothing is felt anymore—that it corresponds to the spectator "to close the meaning of the work". Camp Fires does not imagine an audience dedicated to contemplation more or less crazy, more or less informed, more or less diverted. Rather, it proposes modes of movement through space and modes of use of works that necessarily produce, and will produce, an alteration of their coordinates. And it aims to challenge, and convene, a series of specific audiences through a program that aims to fulfill the promise of meeting and strengthening ties that we associate with a fire, and encourage the heat of the show to spill into academics echoes, artistic reverberations or activism networks. A week after the opening, for example, Emilio Bianchic gave a nail sculpture workshop with the participation of activists from the Trans Memory Archive. Crossing the screen that contained it, momentarily renouncing its work statute, Bianchic's tutorial was emancipated to transform itself into knowing how to share with one of the most marginalized communities of Argentine society. And excuse for a long conversation about a local history of resistance and struggles that trans activists strive to ignite.



Vista de instalación: Obra de Jes Fan, en Camp Fires, curada por Kerry Doran, Violeta Mansilla y Simon Wursten Marín, en UV Estudios, Buenos Aires. Imagen cortesía de l\* artista y UV Estudios

Camp Fires is thus inscribed in a venerable tradition. Practically extinguished from contemporary life, the fire has a very long and dispersed history, which in the West we associate with moments of communion with friends and with nature, but also with those illustrious ancestors that made the fire the circulation point of knowledge and the takeoff platform for all conspiracies: the witches. Without a doubt, this exhibition is an internationalist coven, a meeting of sorceresses and magicians from different latitudes, speakers of different languages and different cultures, all utilizing a connection with the body that tests Spinoza's question for its limits and its power. Does anyone know what a body can do? The artists gathered in this exhibition seem to obsessively seek answers to that question, making their bodies not so much a standard of more or less stable identities (according to the logic of representation) but laboratories in which the scope of the human is cooked and the possibility that this evolutionary (?) milestone be overcome (according to the above-mentioned logic of experimentation). The human becomes thus an element to mix and match, a subordinate principle that adds to the gueer reprogramming scene, as evidenced in the animal choreographic athletics of Young Boy Dancing Group, in the digital survival that SOPHIE gives its face, in the cosmetological synthesis of the woman designed by Jes Fan and in the ritual training that Florencia Rodríguez Giles illustrates, to name just a of the works. The beings that inhabit these and other interventions live suspended in a limbo in which the new does not finish being born because the old does not finish dying. Being the old and the new stress points in that long-time arc that we call humanity.

Yes. The evidence found in caves in South Africa indicates that the first fires were made by our ancestors Australopithecus robustus and Homo erectus approximately 1.6 million years ago. The appeal to camp fire, then, beyond the clever of the pun, seeks to question that which extends as an igneous thread from what was not yet an us to what, as this exhibition states, no longer is.



UP AND COMING

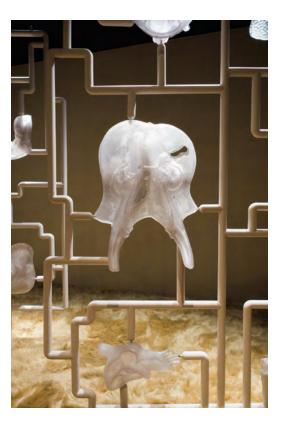
藝術新貌 每月一面



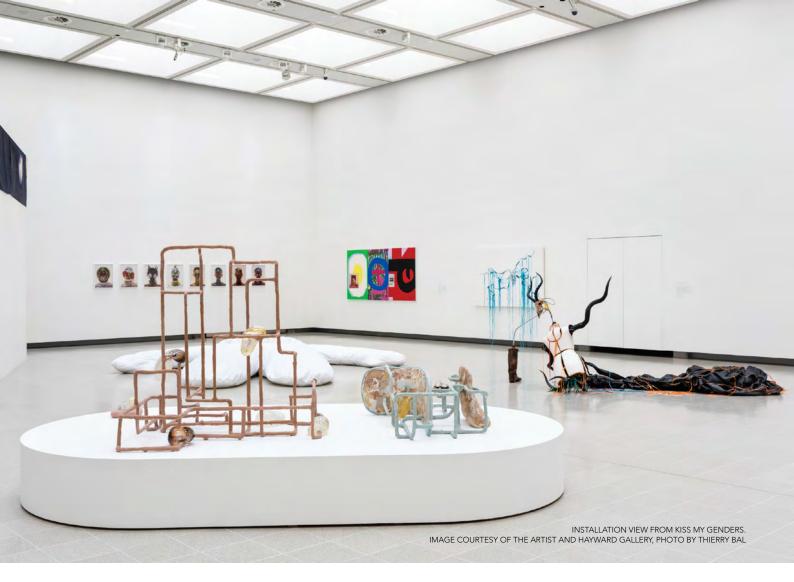
Text by Samwai Lam Photo courtesy of the artist



MOTHER IS A WOMAN, 2018



VISIBLE WOMAN, 2018



emerging ARTIST 04 范加



范加(JES FAN) 花了不少力氣,才說服母親把尿液 「借」給他,好讓JES將尿液轉為白色雌激素霜。在錄 像作品《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》,我們看到泛起 泡沫的黃金色液體經過實驗室器材的處理,流過試管經 過量杯。繼而,錄影風格和旁白令到整個過程恰如嚴謹 的科學實驗。「回想過來,大概沒什麼比起手持媽媽的 尿液更加超現實的事了。」他忍俊不禁在螢幕前發笑。

我們透過SKYPE進行訪問,時差關係,JES似是剛 醒來,戴著帽子,身後的背景蠻寬敞,格局卻不像工 作室。他生於加拿大,在香港長大,其後於RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN,主修玻璃製作,聽 得懂廣東話,但以英語表達自己更為自然。加拿大、 香港、美國,何處為家?「說來奇怪,我到現時也沒固 定居住地址,銀行信寄往朋友家。如果你問我在哪裡生 活,我會答BROOKLYN,但哪裡是家,我暫時沒有答 案。」

為什麼選擇主修玻璃製作? 「其實我想過珠寶設計又或 雕塑,因為我很迷戀細節,而珠寶設計能夠配合我的 偏好。有次,我在課堂上看人吹製玻璃,感覺實在太 神奇,玻璃這種物料恍如有生命似的,能夠對抗地心吸 力。」

#### 解感之重要

在JES的作品裡,我們見到不少玻璃的蹤影(譬如: 《SYSTEMS II》與《SYSTEMS III》)。他是喜歡凡 事親身實踐的藝術家,甚至帶點工匠精神。觸感貫穿於 他的作品裡,譬如去年在EMPTY GALLERY個展中, 觸感是首個感官刺激,他特意用粉紅色的人造毛皮地毯 裝飾牆壁和地板,某部份角度留有黏糊糊的人造矽膠。 他談起對觸覺的興趣。「早前我去參加關於人工智能的 討論會,當中提及『我們怎樣衡量智能』?『機械人 怎樣才算有智能?』有人提出取決於回應,像SIRI(蘋 果IOS系統中的人工智能助理軟體)一樣,懂得問用戶 『有什麼可以幫到你?』然而,有專家提出,對於有障 礙用言語表達的人來說(譬如自閉症患者),她們不用 語言,而是透過觸感對四週作出回應。那也是反應的一 種,但在人工智能裡,語言和觸覺有等級之分,人們往

《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》不只是美容霜。」

《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》的旁白如是說。這並非 誇誇其談的廣告,而是一個真實陳述。繼而,畫面中人 慢條斯理地把「美容霜」塗在臉上。接近純白的面霜 和肌膚顏色形成強烈對比。乍聽之下,尿液和美容霜在 性質上已是兩種極端,前者由身體排出,後者則塗在身 上。「科學產業經常標榜自己是客觀。我們一般認為美 容霜是乾淨,很大程度受到市場銷售和廣告包裝下影 響,當中的邏輯具有爭議性的。我記得有次經過旺角的 大型美容店,發現以試管包裝的骨膠原補充劑,竟然含 有最廉價的魚,而我們並沒留意,香港是非常習慣現成 品的城市。」變相,作品裡的幽默亦是對城市的批判。 《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》令人想到廣東話俚語「 鬼唔知阿媽係女人」,一如上述關於美容霜是乾淨的「 邏輯」。JES戳破俚語的盲點,扭轉一些我們習以為常 的觀點,拉闊對『阿媽』以及家庭的定義,在酷兒的世 界,家庭絕對不只是血緣。

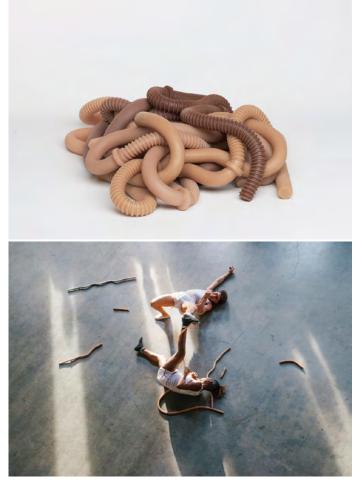
#### 元素何以成形?

轉化時常出現在JES的藝術實踐中,譬如玻璃製作的具 體過程是用鐵管的一端從熔爐蘸取玻璃液,慢慢旋轉, 逐漸凝結成型,高透明度的矽膠會受到水的酸性介質 產生變化,而激素在我們體內會隨著時間有所增減。 「我對那些物品、元素何以成形很有興趣,不斷的變 動,不停的變化代表媒材本身的流動性。」流動性和身 體或多或少也有一定關係,在《VISIBLE WOMAN》 中,JES運用3D打印樹脂,PPE管和顏料砌成一個 結構性強的雕塑,看不見有明顯的女性形象,接近透 明的模型被置於管子上,猶如掏空了的身體部份散落 各處。JES提及學者RACHEL C. LEE, 「她的著作

《THE EXQUISITE CORPSE OF ASIAN AMERICA: BIOPOLITICS, BIOSOCIALITY, AND POSTHUMAN ECOLOGIES》書寫人類在當下社會的焦慮,涉及生命 政治(BIOPOLITICS),圍繞著亞裔美國藝術家,作 家和表演者怎樣仔細檢查她們的身體部位?」何謂生命 政治呢?傅柯在《THE BIRTH OF BIOPOLITICS》主 要探討國家機器如何隨著市場經濟的動態發展,影響關 於人口、健康、家庭等社會政策,尤其是我們對生命的 認知與掌控經歷重大的躍變,「當我們可以買男子氣概

(MASCULINITY),那到底代表什麼?譬如我請科學 家運用我媽的尿液轉化為面膜,它們如同分子(MOL-ECULES)般存在,涉及交易。人的身體何以組成?為 什麼我們仍然給予分子身份認同?舉運動員CASTER SEMENYA為例,她代表南非參加世界田徑錦標賽女子 800米跑比賽,獲得冠軍後卻被質疑,因為體內含有超 出標準的睪酮(TESTOSTERONE)。我們所謂的女 性特點(WOMANHOOD)、男子(MANHOOD)取 決於生物化合物(BIOLOGICAL COMPOUNDS)的 比例。人被數據化、系統化了。」

酷兒在當下社會的確是很時髦的概念。難得的是,JES 的作品既著重概念,亦追求工藝的技術,拒絕淺白、對 號入座的象徵,以幽默、具個人風格的美學創作作品, 辨析世界的表象。



DISPOSED TO ADD, 2017 © CITYHOWWHY.COM.HK 2019

"Forget Sorrow Grass: An Archaeology of Feminine Time", Times Museum Publishing, 2019



## 80 范加 Jes Fan



在《母亲是女的》里,范加在已经绝经的母亲的尿液样本中提取了 雌激素。她的雌激素之后被混入一种乳霜中,被分发给不是艺术家 亲属的人。这个项目试图理解微妙的"自然"和"人造"的性别构成, 提出一些看似荒谬的问题——如果你的身体吸收了艺术家母亲的雌 激素,那你可以被她女性化吗?如果可以的话,对于她来说你是谁, 对于艺术家来说你又是谁?我们的肌肤表皮可以成为亲属关系的第 一次接触吗?

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《母亲是女的(乳霜)》, 2018—19。 Mother is a Woman (Cream), 2018—19.

### 母亲是女的 2018

彩色有声高清视频 4 分 44 秒 摄像:艾莎、韦斯特考特 由艺术家和香港 Empty Gallery 惠允

### 母亲是女的(乳霜) 2018—19

雌激素、乳液、试管、硅胶 25.4 × 19.7 × 6.4 厘米 由艺术家和香港 Empty Gallery 惠允

#### Mother is a Woman 2018

HD Video, color, sound 4 min 44 sec Videographer: Asa Westcott Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

### Mother is a Woman (Cream) 2018—19

Estrogen, lotion, test tube, silicone 25.4 × 19.7 × 6.4 cm Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong In *Mother is a Woman*, Jes Fan extracted estrogen from urine samples collected from his post-menopausal mother. Her estrogen was then blended into a face cream and distributed to folks outside of the artist's biological kin. This project grapples with the slippery constitution of "natural" and "synthetic" genders, asking seemingly absurd questions—If your body absorbs the artist's mother's estrogen, are you feminized by her? If so, who are you to her, and who are you to the artist? Can our epidermis be the first contact of kinship?

## 122 Ad Minoliti

义徳・米诺里提

于阿根廷布宜诺斯艾利斯的 PPueyrredón 国家美术学院获得艺术学士学位后,艾 德·米诺里提在全球包括北美、南美、欧洲、亚洲等地的画廊、机构和博物馆展 出。米诺里提最近的画廊个展在柏林的 Peres Projects 举办,她最近还参加了由拉 尔夫·鲁戈夫策划的第 58 届威尼斯双年展,以及伦敦南岸中心的群展。米诺里提 在阿根廷赢得了许多艺术奖项,同时受到包括阿根廷文化部、布宜诺斯艾利斯大 都会艺术基金会和墨西哥国家文化艺术委员会下属的国家文化艺术基金的资助。 自 2009 年以来,她一直是阿根廷艺术调查中心的成员,同年她还创立了由阿根廷 画家组成的女权主义团体 PintorAs。 Since earning a BFA from the National Academy of Fine Arts P. Pueyrredón in

Buenos Aires, Argentina, Ad Minoliti has exhibited at galleries, institutions and museums globally including in North and South America, Europe and Asia. Minoliti's most recent solo gallery exhibition was at Peres Projects, Berlin and she has most recently participated in both the 58th Venice Biennial, curated by Ralph Rugoff, as well as a group exhibition at the Southbank Centre, London. Minoliti has won numerous artistic prizes in Argentina, and has received grants from the Ministry of Culture of Argentina, the Metropolitan Fund for the Arts of Buenos Aires and Mexico's National Fund for Culture and Arts attached to National Council for Culture and the Arts, amongst others. She has been an agent at the Artistic Investigation

Center of Argentina since 2009, the same year in which she also founded the group

# Cécile B. Evans

PintorAs, a feminist collective of Argentinian painters.

塞西尔・B・埃文斯是一位美国和比利时艺术家,生活和工作于伦敦。她的作品检验在当代社会中情绪的价值,以及遭遇意识形态结构和技术结构时情感的叛逆。
 她近期的个展在阿布泰贝格博物馆、马德雷博物馆、Chateau Shatto、Tramway艺术中心、路德维希基金会现代艺术馆博物馆、利沃利城堡、维也纳伊曼纽尔·莱尔画廊、利物浦泰特美术馆、奥尔胡斯美术馆、M-勒芬博物馆、哈勒姆现代艺术
 博物馆等地举办。她的作品曾在包括慕尼黑艺术之家、水户艺术塔、芝加哥文艺复兴协会、第7届莫斯科双年展、第4届乌拉尔工业双年展、Kamel Mennour 画廊、路易斯安娜现代美术馆、第9届柏林双年展、第20届悉尼双年展、胡安・米罗基金会、巴黎现代美术馆展出。她的作品还被纽约现代美术馆、迈阿密卢贝尔家族收藏、惠特尼美术馆、哈勒姆弗兰斯・哈尔斯美术馆、都灵利沃利城堡、路易斯安娜现代美术馆和奥弗涅地区当代艺术基金会收藏。

Cécile B. Evans is an American-Belgian artist living and working in London. Her work examines the value of emotion in contemporary society and the rebellion of feelings as they come into contact with ideological and technological structures. Recent selected solo exhibitions include Museum Abteiberg, Madre Museum, Chateau Shatto, Tramway, mumok Vienna, Castello di Rivoli, Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna, Tate Liverpool, Kunsthalle Aarhus, M-Museum Leuven, and De Hallen Haarlem. Her work has been included amongst others at Haus der Kunst in Munich, Mito Art Tower, Renaissance Society Chicago, the 7th International Moscow Biennale, the 4th Ural Industrial Biennial, Galerie Kamel Mennour, and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, the 9th Berlin Biennale, the 20th Sydney Biennale, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, and Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. Public collections include The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Whitney Museum of American Art, De Haallen, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, and FRAC Auvergne.

范加是一位生于加拿大、长于香港、现工作于纽约布鲁克林的艺术家。他是多 奖项 及驻地计划的获得者,如琼·米切尔画家和雕塑家奖、Recess Art 的 Session 驻地项目、比米斯当代艺术中心驻地、艺术与设计博物馆的范・利尔奖、先锋工 作驻地、罗德岛设计学院的约翰·A·奇罗纳纪念奖。范加的作品曾在美国及国 际上的展览展出,其中包括香港 Empty Gallery 的"母亲是女的"、伦敦海沃德美 术馆的"Kiss My Genders"、匹兹堡卡耐基梅隆大学的"Paradox: Haptic Body in the Age of AI"、费城 Vox Populi 画廊的"Disposed to Add"、比利时玻璃屋博 物馆"Whereabouts"和上海外滩美术馆的"百物曲"。范加的作品曾在《艺术论坛》 《AsiaArtPacific》《BOMB》《Frieze》和"Hyperallergic"上被评述过。 Jes Fan is a Brooklyn-based artist born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong. He is the recipient of various fellowships and residencies, such as the Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant, Recess Art Session Residency, Bemis Center Residency, Van Lier Fellowship at Museum of Arts and Design, Pioneer Works Residency, John A. Chironna Memorial Award at RISD. Fan has exhibited in the United States and internationally; selected exhibitions include Mother is a Woman at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong; Kiss My Genders at Hayward Gallery, London; Paradox: Haptic Body in the Age of AI at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh; Disposed to Add at Vox Populi Gallery, Philadelphia: Whereabouts at GlazenHuis Museum. Belgium: An Opera for Animals at Rockbund Museum, Shanghai, Fan's work has been reviewed by Artforum, Hyperallergic, AsiaArtPacific, BOMB magazine, and Frieze magazine.

# Yunyu "Ayo" Shih+Zijie

施昀佑 1985 年生于台湾彰化,毕业于台湾大学历史学系(2007),芝加哥艺术学 院雕塑创作硕士(艺术硕士,2014)。从 2010 年开始创作至今,施昀佑的作品形 式一直与其身处的空间密切相关:他能在台北以一栋历史建筑为媒材进行创作, 而身处长期的移动状态时,他的作品也随之进入行李箱,成为档案、文件与书册, 讲述着一则又一则的故事。在创作中,他经常使用不同的形式探索纪念碑和记忆 的样貌,同时也总是纳入他和国家机器以及机构之间的互动,但相对于一种对抗 的姿态,施昀佑更倾向于使用一种共存或渗透的手法来探索这中间的模糊地带。 施昀佑曾获芝加哥新艺术家协会新艺术家奖,文化部驻地奖金,国家艺术基金会 国际交流补助。曾受邀参与斯科希甘绘画雕塑学校、北极圈艺术家驻地计划、4-18 哥伦比亚驻地计划。作品曾于台北北师美术馆、上海当代美术馆、武汉剩余空间、 台北当代艺术中心、VT 非常庙、纽约 PRACTICE 艺术空间、哥伦比亚 4-18 艺术空间、 北京长征空间、贝尔格勒国家文化中心等地展出。

Yunyu Ayo Shih (b. Changhua, 1985) graduated from National Taiwan University with a BA in History in 2007 and School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an MFA in Sculpture in 2014. Since he started to make art in 2010, Shih's work has always related closely to the space he situated; In Taipei, a city he lived in for ten years, he turned a whole building into the subject of his art. While he is constantly moving and relocating, his works are stored in suitcases and become archives, documents, and

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JES FAN Systems II, 2018

Jes Fan uses primarily sculpture and installation to speculatively re-configure racial and transgender identity. For the installation Systems I 2018 Fan injects their ethereal glass sculptures with silicone, followed by melanin pigments, laboriously harvested in scientific laboratories. The resulting plump globules stained with abstract patterns created by melanin's black pigmentation are displayed on a steel, jungle-gym-like structure. They are, paradoxically, concrete abstractions of a body. In Systems II and Systems III (2018), Fan repeats their experimental glassmaking process with hormones. In this series, glass becomes a receptacle for both the essential markers and conceptual metamorphoses of identity. As Fan explains, their practice is a study in material essentialism, albeit to the point of absurdity. In Fan's thoughtful works, identity, when boiled down to its core, is not easily consumed or classifiable.

*Kiss My Genders* celebrates more than 30 international artists whose work counters entrenched gender narratives.

Featuring works from the late 1960s through to the present, *Kiss My Genders* focuses on artists who draw on their own experiences to unsettle stable conceptions of gender. Working across photography, painting, installation, sculpture, text and film, these artists open up new notions of gender, beauty and representations of the human form, while also engaging with ideas around nature, storytelling, wellness and toxicity, and abstraction as a strategy of resistance.

With original essays by Amrou Al-Kadhi, Paul Clinton, Charlie Fox, Jack Halberstam, Manuel Segade and Susan Stryker, this publication also includes an excerpt from Renate Lorenz's influential *Queer Art. A Freak Theory*, poetry by Travis Alabanza, Jay Bernard, Tarek Lakhrissi and Nat Raha as well as a roundtable discussion between a number of the artists and curator Vincent Honoré.

Artists featured are Ajamu, Amrou Al-Kadhi and Holly Falconer, Lyle Ashton Harris, Sadie Benning, Nayland Blake, Pauline Boudry Renate Lorenz, Flo Brooks, Luciano Castelli, Jimmy DeSana, Jes Fan, Chitra Ganesh, Martine Gutierrez, Nicholas Hlobo, Peter Hujar, Juliana Huxtable, Joan Jett Blakk, Zoe Leonard, Ad Minoliti, Pierre Molinier, Kent Monkman, Zanele Muholi, Catherine Opie, Planningtorock, Christina Quarles, Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings, Hunter Reynolds, Athi-Patra Ruga, Tejal Shah, Victoria Sin, Jenkin van Zyl and Del LaGrace Volcano.







## Think Through Your Body

By Simon Wu | Jun 26, 2019



Jes Fan. Systems III, 2018. Silicone, Glass, Epoxy, Melanin, Glass, Estradiol, Wood; 48"x 25"x19". © Jes Fan. Courtesy of the artist.

Jes Fan's recent work explores the material bases of identity by working with isolated natural chemicals such as melanin, estrogen, and testosterone. Fan suspends these liquids in blown glass, and the contrast between their innocuous, whimsical appearance and the ideologies of racial and gendered power that they buttress is absurd, almost incomprehensible. Systems III (2018) is emblematic of this series: a fleshy lattice reminiscent of circuitry, scaffolding, or plumbing that evokes the body, with its sags and folds. Fan's work is often couched in discourses of identity and their co-optation within biopolitical capitalism. Here, instead, I offer a personal take on one work, Systems III, by comparing it to three creative forms—a poem, essay, and song—which have stimulated my thinking and helped me to understand Fan's work, toward reshaping the boundaries between what we know and what we fear about ourselves.

#### A poem: "Study of Two Figures (Pasiphaë/Sado)" by Monica Youn

This poem by Monica Youn considers two mythical figures: Pasiphaë, a princess of Crete who was cursed by Poseidon to climb into a wooden cow in order to have sex with a bull, eventually birthing the Minotaur; and Sado, a Korean prince who is sentenced to death in a rice container. For Youn, the physical containers holding these protagonists pale in comparison to the linguistic containers of identity (female, Asian) that lead them to their fates.

Youn, like Fan, considers the arbitrariness of these containers—nationalism, race, gender—as they have come to restrain and fix certain life trajectories: "Revealing a racial marker in a poem is like revealing a gun in a story or like revealing a nipple in a dance."<sup>1</sup> Both understand that the body is not a container for the ingredients of one's identity; identity exists within the body and extends beyond it. In Fan's Systems III, glass globules contain droplets of testosterone, melanin, and estrogen. However, as these chemicals appear as suspended, whimsical speckles in glass, their significance is not manifested on the surface of their container, as they are when they are contained within a human being. Rather, they persist in a frozen state of interiority, as if replicating the restricting logic of racial and gendered containers: to be no more than the sum of the chemicals that are suspended within. Fan's work visualizes the intractability of this identity model, as Youn's poem does in its relentless logic of entrapment. Both works ask us to reconsider what containers hold us into ourselves.



Jes Fan. Systems III, 2018. Closeup. Silicone, Glass, Epoxy, Melanin, Glass, Estradiol, Wood; 48"x25"x19". © Jes Fan. Courtesy of the artist.

An essay: "The Sucker, the Sucker!" about the octopus, by Amia Srinivasan With its fleshy scaffolds and the drooping, translucent weight of the glass, Systems III resembles an octopus. The mottled, pale pinks of its surfaces make me think of glossy, wet skin; the blue pipes are like arms extending inside and outside of itself, in alien repose.

Like humans, they [octopi] have centralised nervous systems, but in their case there is no clear distinction between brain and body. An octopus's neurons are dispersed throughout its body, and two-thirds of them are in its arms: each arm can act intelligently on its own, grasping, manipulating and hunting.<sup>2</sup>

The octopus has more neural matter in its arms than in its head. These networks are separate, but they correspond with one another. In a way, an octopus can have conversations with itself. Systems III is a schematic for this sort of self-Othering and mind-body melding. The tubing resembles arms and is like the system of neural pathways encased in dermis. The surfaces ripple as if electric with thoughts and emotions. Systems III encounters a viewer as a proposition: Can you think like this, with your body?

This melding of the mental and the physical is a soothing rejoinder to the insistent division of mind and body in Cartesian logic, so beloved by the cerebral space of the gallery. What might it be like to think through your body, to communicate to your arms—to all parts of yourself—the way an octopus does? If the nature of an octopus reveals that, in some ways, we are always an Other to ourselves, it also implies that this othering is not necessarily a cause for despair, but a site of potential, even celebration.



Jes Fan, injecting a silicone filled glass globule with a substance. Production still from the New York Close Up episode, "Jes Fan In Flux." © Art21, Inc. 2019.

#### A song: "Chorus" by Holly Herndon

Holly Herndon makes music by teaching an artificial neural network (lovingly named Spawn) how to sing. She inputs pop and dance music as well as vocal samples from YouTube, Skype, and other audio sources from the digital landscape, like beeps and dings for email and other notifications. The result of this collaboration between Herndon and her AI network is a slippery, ethereal soundscape.

Herndon and Fan share an outlook toward technology that is measured, a desire to see it as neither the best nor the worst thing ever. Herndon's manipulated voice throbs and whirrs in a way that is both pleasurable and unsettling. Familiar sounds like email alerts and keyboard clatter are loosed from their normal usage, made harmonic. Similarly, Fan collaborates with laboratories to explore the lives of natural chemicals outside of their pharmaceutical administration; Systems III is a body or several bodies, with two flesh-like panels facing away from each other. Flesh, bone, and hormones appear separated, in pink panels, blue tubes, and glass globules. It's a remix of the body, and of the self, with its psychic and physical barriers rearranged.

As our bodies and creativities are peppered with adjustments by emerging technologies, Fan, as well as Herndon and Youn (and octopi) are not that interested in shoring up the borders of any single body. Rather, they hope to open those borders toward an increased porousness: the understanding that technology—in the form of nervous systems, animals, consciousness, AI, or natural chemicals—has always been with us and within us, both foreign and familiar.

<sup>1</sup>Monica Youn, "Study of Two Figures (Pasiphaë/Sado)," Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/148962/study-of-two-figures-pasipha-sado.

<sup>2</sup>Amia Srinivasan, "The Sucker, the Sucker!" London Review of Books 39, no. 17 (September 7, 2017): 23–25. Accessed at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n17/amia-srinivasan/the-sucker-the-sucker.



## Jes Fan In Flux

New York Close Up| May 15, 2019



One of five new films from the second wave of Art21's 2019 programming

How can we be certain that the binary can satisfy us? A trained glass artist, sculptor Jes Fan creates elegant installation works that quietly question our most fundamental assumptions about gender, race, and identity. At UrbanGlass in downtown Brooklyn, the artist heats, rolls, and sculpts molten glass. He explains, "Learning how this matter transformed itself from one state into another really entranced me into thinking, 'How I can I apply it to other mediums?'"

At the Recess artist residency in Brooklyn, Fan constructs a new work, filling hollow glass globules with silicone and injecting them with politically charged biological materials like testosterone, estrogen, melanin, and fat. These organ-like forms are then hung on a lattice structure. Detaching biological substances from the context of the body, Fan is able to examine their meanings and allow the viewer to see them in a completely new light.

Fan's personal experiences—moving from his native Hong Kong to the United States, growing up queer, and transitioning—have profoundly shaped his artistic practice. "Maybe it is triggering the similar experiences of being racialized or being gendered," says Fan of handling the materials injected into his work. "It's just a disposition that you're constantly placed in—a constant act of othering."

Featured works include Mother is a Women (2018) and Systems II (2018).

Credits

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Jes Fan, Diagram VI, 2018, Aqua-Resin, glass, epoxy, 6 × 13 × 5".

#### Jes Fan

RECESS ACTIVITIES, INC.

At Recess, a roomful of strangers seated themselves around folding tables and sliced open dead squid. They sifted through viscera to locate the cephalopods' ink sacs, which they then extracted, pierced, and squeezed, draining the organs' viscous contents into jars. Artist Jes Fan led the autopsy He circled the tables to lend each group hands-on help, and he distributed a DIY pamphlet with a diagram of squid innards and several pages of fun facts on melanin, the biomolecule that gives squid ink its dark hue. Melanin absorbs gamma radiation, which is why melanized fungal microorganisms can survive in space stations and the ruins of Chernobyl. Scientists say that a protective layer of melanin could, in the future, be applied to the hulls of interplanetary vessels. Of course, melanin is also found in human skin at varying concentrations, resulting in the range of complexions that are a determining factor in the social construction of race.

After mixing the melanin with soda ash, fructose, and water, participants dropped square swatches of off-white cloth into the jars, sealed them, and then set them over heat. Fan showed everyone samples of melanin he had grown from *E. coli* bacteria in collaboration with a local biotech company as well as several balloon-shaped handblown glass sculptures, each filled with a combination of melanin and transparent silicone. He explained how he had become interested in exploring melanin as a sculptural material after previously working with synthetic testosterone and estrogen, hormones often prescribed to align an individual's secondary sexual characteristics with their gender identity. When the swatches were removed from their jars an hour later, the fabric was dyed black with melanin, transformed by "difference" in its purest distillation.

This memorable evening of dissection and conversation was held under the auspices of Recess's signature "Sessions" series, an exhibition-*cum*-residency where invited artists produce and present their work on-site. For the duration of Fan's commission, "Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin," Recess's main gallery assumed aspects of both an artist's studio and a laboratory with sculptures installed beside shelves of petri dishes and vials. A worktable held a row of books by such prominent theorists as Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Donna Haraway Nearby lay a copy of Ari Larissa Heinrich's *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body* (2018). On the wall, a quote from Rachel C. Lee's *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality and Posthuman Ecologies* (2014) was pinned to the center of a large sheet of butcher paper, reading in part [w]e cannot begin to understand the focus on form, aesthetics, affect, theme, autonomy (and all those other things supposedly lending the field coherence outside of "biology") without understanding the cultural anxieties around being biological in an era that is reconceptualizing the body

These accumulated references added up to a narrative that goes like this: Poststructuralist claims that identity is produced discursively have always been met with a certain skepticism rooted in the apparent constants of biology However, in recent years, advances in applied science and a materialist turn in philosophy have disaggregated "life" into its molecular building blocks, thereby progressively destabilizing the distinctions between male and female, human and animal, or even animate and inanimate. Today scholars such as Heinrich and Lee, who specialize in Chinese and Asian American literature, respectively, draw from critical race theory and object-oriented ontology and postcolonialism and medical humanities and queer theory and animal studies.

In art, a parallel trajectory runs from postmodernism's critique of representation in the 1980s to contemporary hybrid practices such as Fan's, where the sculptural, the scientific, and the social intermingle. A remarkable aspect of "Obscure Functions" was how well the artist manipulated the medium of glass to capture melanin's multiple valences. The pigmented sculptures bulged and folded so as to appear both hard and soft; Fan accentuated this effect by arranging the works over rigid armatures of resin and metal. At certain points, the glass suggested laboratory instruments. At others, it evoked perfume bottles, as if prefiguring a time when melanin becomes a designer product, a grimly logical next step to the ongoing history of commodifying blackness. Above all, the sculptures' shapes were promiscuously biomorphic, resembling molecules, organs, orifices, skin, bodies of all kinds—wriggling forms of life that refuse any single definition.

— Colby Chamberlain



#### Studio Visit: Jes Fan by Lumi Tan

Giving melanin a life of its own.



Photo: Jes Fan.

The first thing Jes Fan asks me to do in his studio is hold the melanin, slowly rocking back and forth a test tube in which a thick, black liquid moves at its own particular pace. Fan remarks that it carries the weight and viscosity of a Chinese sesame soup dessert; its unyielding darkness reminds me of another popular Asian dessert, grass jelly. Later, he'll put a few drops directly on my palm, leaving me to deliberate how tangible this simple pigment is, and what an outsized role in racial identity—and thus racial construction, colorism, and racism—it accommodates.

I'm visiting Fan in the first few weeks of his Recess Session residency "Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin." Melanin in this studio exists as a genetically modified E. coli bacteria made with Brooklyn Bio, a for-hire research lab, then collected and grown in test tubes and petri dishes. Organically, melanin exists in fungi, mold, and cephalopods, in addition to humans. One of the most pertinent questions in Fan's work is the possibility of kinship outside biology, which was explored in his previous project Mother is a Woman (2018), a custom beauty cream infused with estrogen from his mother's urine. (I also apply this on my hand during the visit, a generous and thick mass.) With this cream, Fan asked if femininity and maternalism was communicable through a commercial product. Similarly, Obscure Functions releases the melanin from the confines of our human biases into a potential binding for interspecies kinship.



Photo: Minü Han.

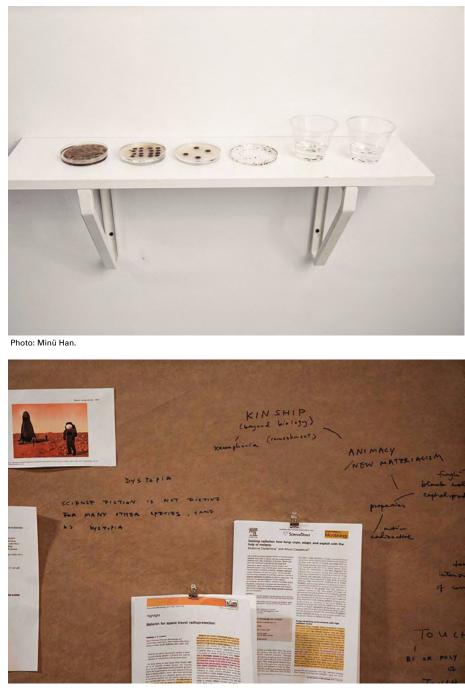


Photo: Minü Han.

Pinned to Fan's research board is an academic paper that touts the anti-radioactive properties of melanin, complete with a cartoon rendering of humans landing on Mars in which the bright whites of NASA spacecraft and suits are now a dark brown. In this future, science becomes disconnected from the purity and objectivity of whiteness; within the context of Fan's project, it is inextricable from the centuries-old myth that race is based in scientific fact, a potent form of racism still to be debunked for many. In a forthcoming video, Fan plays on the anxiety produced between the sterility and automations of the lab and the invisible contamination that permeates our everyday. Fan informs me that one of the most radioactive sites in New York City is a major transit hub a few blocks away from Recess's Clinton Hill location.

Despite this description of his work, Fan does not primarily employ ephemeral matter. In fact, he is deeply invested in objectmaking, with a particular investment in glass as a transformative material. Fan has been suspending the melanin in glass globules that act as imaginary organs, intimately scaled to the body. They suspend themselves around a central frame, a playground of sorts for these comforting anthropomorphic forms. The glass provides a permanent archive for the melanin, giving it a solidity and weight but never a prescribed function. It grants the melanin a life of its own, without us.

Jes Fan: Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin is on view at Recess in New York City until October



Photo: Minü Han.



Photo: Minü Han.



## ARI LARISSA HEINRICH: APPLIED CO-ENMESHMENT

October 2018. Written in parallel with Jes Fan: Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin

It is through frameworks emphasizing co-enmeshment that our new terrains of material design, and our speculated new infrastructures and economies can do something other than breathe and pulse in the same empiric ways.[1]

Rachel C. Lee, The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies

What is the smallest unit of race? Anthropologist Duana Fullwiley has argued that it's the molecule. She describes an unintended consequence of early attempts by genomics researchers to sort newly available DNA data according to "race." Though the researchers meant to promote "health equity through the biological prism of race," she observes, they failed to account for the social meanings of "race" that had unconsciously shaped their research. As a result, the researchers wound up reinforcing dangerous cultural myths about race's "biological" foundations. "[T]his back and forth between DNA and its seemingly natural organization by societal descriptors of race," Fullwiley argues, "works to molecularize race itself. This happens through practices of marked recruitment, storage, organization and reporting that rely on sorting DNA by US racial population differences[.]"[2]

About ten years later, in 2018, sociologists Sibille Merz and Ros Williams complement Fullwiley's critique of the reification of biological race in early genome sequencing with a call to factor in the "broader socio-economic and political inequalities minority communities face" as well. Merz and Williams point out that "[t]he rise of the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates that establishing more equitable social conditions requires much more—of all of us—than participation in clinical trials and tissue donation. Analyses of how race is put to work for the production of value in biomedicine must be attuned to this political and social reality. Racialised bodies do matter in the lab and the clinic." Merz and Williams conclude: "Beyond this domain…the value of these same bodies remains firmly in question." In thinking about the "molecularization of race," there continues to be a disconnect between the evolving idealisms of the laboratory and the realities of the communities who stand to benefit from these idealisms.[3]

In a more material sense, a "molecule" often associated with race is melanin. And since melanin is the biological foundation of color in everything from human skin to mold and fungi to squid ink, you could also say that melanin is aesthetic by nature. In "Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin," Jes Fan approaches the molecularization of race through aesthetics by abstracting melanin from its usual associations with what he calls the "social organizing principle...known as race." [4] He does this by producing melanin exogenously in collaboration with the local laboratory Brooklyn Bio (experimenting with using DNA sequences and also the fungus Cryptococcus neoformans), then mixing the lab-grown melanin with rubber. The resulting mixture is then placed inside bean-shaped blisters of clear custom glass, benign blown bubbles that fold where they land on the sinewy scaffolding of the installation's central sculpture, "Systems I." Some of the melanin mixture is also placed in glove box chambers at intervals throughout the gallery space, where visitors can reach in and "touch" the melanin. And on October 12th, 2018, the artist will stage a dyeing workshop, where participants can experiment with dyeing textiles in melanin.[5]

At Recess Gallery, a radical intervention that Fan makes as an artist is to partner with laboratory scientists to make melanin that is, for the most part, divorced from associations with human hosts: to decontextualize and then recontextualize melanin in the gallery space. In conceiving this project, Fan therefore plays with the tension between the prevailing older social connotations of melanin and the more recent iterations of melanin's materiality that emerge from within these social formations. Fan first isolates melanin as an object, in other words, and then fabricates an experimental social environment for it in the gallery. What if we could re-invent the social life of melanin from scratch?

#### **Object Making**

In referencing the social life of melanin, I refer here to those meanings and associations with melanin that—though no less "real"—happen beyond the realm of the purely material or physical. Here Fan's work resonates strongly with Mel Chen's study of the racialized "animacy" of the metal lead during the "lead scare" in the U.S. in 2007. In their study of mainstream media, Chen describes how "the lead painted onto children's toys was animated and racialized as Chinese," while "its potential victims were depicted as largely white."[6] For Fan, melanin too possesses a kind of racialized "animacy," namely in melanin's role as a building-block in what Rachel C. Lee and other scholars have termed the "epidermal notion of race."[7] (As Lee notes, "When we speak of races—for example, Blumenbach's influential quintuple chromatic schema, we refer to the differentiation of humans [homo sapiens] into subdivided populations distinguished, for the most part, phenotypically [aka by 'observable traits'].")[8]

Historically speaking, this understanding of race as a science of phenotypes, though it claims to be based in age-old scientific "truth," is actually highly contextual; just compare to other global histories where the introduction of visual taxonomy as authoritative race "science" (and colonial values) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clashed with more local explanations of difference. In the case of China, for instance, serious objections were raised to race-based taxonomies when the ideas were first introduced; only later, when the various agendas of "science" were backed by military power and economic authority did a more phenotypically-oriented understanding of race start to take hold, eventually becoming part of a more familiar view of race and racial hierarchies today.[9] Yet as Lee and others remind us, even science now confirms that "race" is a social construct, since "greater genetic variability exists between individual members of the same racial group than across supposedly distinct racial groups."[10] As something that by nature functions visually (e.g., phenotypically), melanin as a social object has therefore been "reverse engineered" to explain or support the taxonomization of humans according to "race." In this sense, if in the "lead scare" of 2007 the molecule of race binds to the molecule of lead almost allegorically, then here the molecule of race and the molecule of melanin bind together as one, almost inseparable.

Yet even as the social life of melanin is made meaningful through the construction of mythologies of epidermal race (and even as the real-time danger of these narratives remains as powerful as ever), melanin's molecular material life has evolved rapidly.[11] Today a scientist can call in an order for a certain chemical sequence—in this case tyrosinase or laccase—and then melanin can be synthesized in the laboratory from L-dopa or tyrosine based on the activity of these laccase or tyrosinase genes, sort of like using a scoby to start a kombucha. Melanin can be purchased online for around \$385/gram, though you can shop around.[12]

In short, the material and social lives of melanin are becoming easier to tease apart. Material Melanin can now be cultured outside the body (outside any body, whether human or otherwise, cephalopod, or fungal), and it can be transported, and maybe even consumed. This mobility in turn renders melanin more legible to neoliberal economics: melanin becomes (almost) a commodity in its own right, while speculations about how to capitalize on its many unique properties emerge accordingly.

#### **Co-enmeshment**

In a general sense, the concept behind "Obscure Functions" calls attention to the ways we imbue certain biological materials with subjective values. But more specifically, as Recess program director Gee Wesley notes, "In isolating melanin, [Fan's project]...allow[s] visitors to feel a fundamental feature of POC skin, but...as sheer materiality, divorced from the encounter with the human bearer."[13]

Does the exhibit's methodic attention to the materiality of melanin therefore also limit the artwork's ability to offer what Rachel C. Lee might call a "thick...description" of "companion relationality"?[14] Does "Obscure Functions" decontextualize feeling? Is the gallery a clinic?

#### No.

Fan's installation accentuates feeling while creating the conditions for new social bonds. As with Fan's other works, an interactive, tactile aspect—a cambered invitation, a suggestion of yearning for connection—informs "Obscure Functions." In Fan's early 2018 installation "Mother is a Woman," for instance, the artist uses estrogen extracted from his mother's urine to create a skin cream; gallery visitors are invited to apply the cream to their own skin. As curator Hera Chan points out, "By allowing the hormone to penetrate their skin, users establish a physical relation with Fan's mother, raising questions about our understanding of kinship. As opposed to redefining the terms of kinship from a social standpoint, Fan researches and uses pharmaceutical hormones and other materials for body modification to determine different forms of biological attachment."[15]

Likewise, "Obscure Functions" takes a pharmaceutical material typically associated with the fixedness of heritability-melanin, the molecular building-block of "epidermal race"-and explores the utopian possibility of repurposing it as an agent of connection. This exploration begins, of course, with the disarticulation of melanin in the lab. But then it carries over to the exhibition space, where the possibility of forging oblique or secondary attachments among viewers is created first by concentrating sensation in multiple touch-stations-the glove box chambers where viewers can insert their hands-and then by displacing it onto the central sculptural installation, "Systems 1." The multiple touch-stations, for instance, scramble touch among visitors so that melanin in the environment of the gallery becomes both external to one's own body and yet at the same time—at least experientially shareable. Yet almost as soon as this shared hapticality of melanin can be registered, it is redistributed through the dynamics of the gallery space to the load-bearing scaffold at the center: "Systems 1," the highly literal "framework [for] co-enmeshment" tasked with bearing the burden of our collective experience. Here glass "molecules" flecked with melanin, as if projected by the force of a powerful exhalation, catch on the bars of a frame sculpted in caked and polished layers of red, purple, and yellow resin reminiscent of a Rainbow Eucalyptus tree—or a human body's exploded internal architecture. [16] Fan's melanin project thus makes room for unscripted connections among visitors that are all the stronger for the implicit challenge they pose to more deterministic understandings of kinship.

On the whole, the artist thus shows an almost romantic propensity for destroying "nature," first by interrupting the immutability of sex, gender, and kinship through the creation of externalizable hormonal bonds in earlier work, and here by interrupting the divisive values often associated with that other biochemical agent we take for granted: melanin. Idealistically speaking, by turning cutting-edge medical technologies in on themselves, Fan's work helps undermine biopolitical justifications for multiple forms of inequality. These justifications include both reproductivity and heritability.

Bring a date.

[1] The unabridged passage from Rachel C. Lee is: "As the foregoing readings of Terreform ONE and deSouza's works suggests, the skin and cladding...that render entities with an extra, desirable capacity to act 'as if' modern—that is, disobliged, impersonal, and unbiological—are ones, paradoxically, that appear more naked, in the sense of approximating literal organs without epidermal sheaths, and in the metaphorical sense of shedding the skin of descent obligations, gendered distinctions, embeddedness in familial and kin statuses, and memory of interdependency on one's environment and social milieu. The dream of such stripping and dislocating from a social and physical suspension...can be countered precisely by re-entangling biology (likeness/living) with its historical and material interdependencies and violences—the making of victims and victors. It is through frameworks emphasizing co-enmeshment [italics mine] that our new terrains of material design, and our speculated new infrastructures and economies can do something other than breathe and pulse in the same empiric ways." Rachel C. Lee, The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies, (NYU, 2014): 254.

[2] Duana Fullwiley (2007) "The Molecularization of Race: Institutionalizing Human Difference in Pharmacogenetics Practice," Science as Culture, 16:1, 1-30, DOI: 10.1080/09505430601180847.

[3] Sibille Merz & Ros Williams (2018) "'We All Have a Responsibility to Each Other': Valuing Racialised Bodies in the Neoliberal Bioeconomy," New Political Economy, 23:5, 560-573, DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2017.1417368.

[4] Jes Fan, from a correspondence with Gee Wesley: "This banal black powder, embedded with a cascade of social meanings, is sold at market price of \$334 a gram, and experimented as an anti-radioactive coating for spacecrafts. It lives in fungi, in mold, in cephalopod ink—but once embodied by human skin, this pigment siphons the host to a social organizing principle that is known as race. Here at Recess, the host for melanin is not human but bacteria, a substance that ironically harkens back to ideas of non-white races as infectious and impure, and miscegenation as a dangerous contamination." Correspondence between Jes Fan and Gee Wesley, shared with me on July 12, 2018.

[5] Something that contributed inspiration for Fan's installation was his discovery that melanin's ability to resist—and in certain cases even thrive on—radiation was being explored by scientists as a means of coating spacecraft and spacesuits to provide protection from radiation in space. As part of my research for this project, I asked where were the nearest radioactive sites in the New York metropolitan region. If you attend the dyeing workshop and would like to test out your new melanin-dyed gear, consider visiting two convenient locations that are listed among New York's most radioactive: 1. a former NYU Polytechnic building that had a nuclear engineering department prior to 1973 (about a 10 minute bike ride from Recess): http://projects.wsj.com/waste-lands/site/367-polytechnic-institute-of-brooklyn/; and 2. an auto repair shop in Flushing (about 4 miles from Recess): https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/primo-autobody-repair.

[6] Chen, Mel Y. Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012: 15: "I argue that the lead painted onto children's toys [in the panic in the United States in 2007] was animated and racialized as Chinese, whereas its potential victims were depicted as largely white. In the context of the interests of the United States, the phrase Chinese lead is consistently rendered not as a banal industrial product, but as an exogenous toxin painted onto the toys of innocent American children, and as the backhanded threat of a previously innocent boon of transnational labor whose exploitative realities are beginning to dawn on the popular subconscious of the United States. This lead scare shifted both its mythic origins and its mythic targets, effectively replacing domestic concerns about black and impoverished children and their exposures to environmental lead."

[7] "When we speak of races—for example, Blumenbach's influential quintuple chromatic schema—we refer to the differentiation of humans (homo sapiens) into subdivided populations distinguished, for the most part, phenotypically." Rachel C. Lee, Exquisite Corpse: 210. On the periodization of the prioritization of skin vs. other body figurations in determining "race" generally, see for instance Ellen Samuels, Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race, New York: New York University Press, 2014.

[8] Full quote: "When we speak of races—for example, Blumenbach's influential quintuple chromatic schema—we refer to the differentiation of humans (homo sapiens) into subdivided populations distinguished, for the most part, phenotypically. At the turn of the twenty-first century, an epidermal notion of race rubs against and in tension with other modes of aggregating populations, for instance, according to (1) often microscopically coded (genomic) markers of disease propensity as well as attempts to document unfolding behavioral-environmental-dietary (epigenetic) regulation of such propensities; (2) a biomodification regime of primary class or economic stratification in which wealthier sectors of society supplement and extend their optimized bodily transformations, while poor and perpetually debt-ridden sectors of society become bioavailable to service this sector's amplified transformations; and (3) scalar perspectives that begin with nonhuman biologies such as those of bacteria and protoctist parasites that potentially promote a less defensive, less immunitary response to our entanglement with alien species and bring consideration to how the organized assemblages called 'human' have coevolved and helped comigrate other nonanimal bare life (plants, fungi)...Critical studies of race have begun to explore the implications of the newer techniques for aggregating populations on the governance of, and niche advertising to, those populations..." Rachel C. Lee, The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies, (NYU, 2014): 210.

[9] See for instance Lydia Liu, Translingual Practice; my Afterlife of Images; Frank Dikotter on race in modern China; and Keevak, Michael. Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking (Princeton, 2011)

[10] Rachel C. Lee, The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies, (NYU, 2014): 54.

[11] Meredith, P. and Sarna, T. (2006), "The physical and chemical properties of eumelanin." Pigment Cell Research, 19: 572-594. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0749.2006.00345.x

[12] Feel free to buy some melanin online. As of September 22, 2018, melanin powder here costs about \$385/gram: https://www.mpbio.com/product.php?pid=02155343&country=223.

[13] Correspondence between Jes Fan and Gee Wesley, shared with me on July 12, 2018.

[14] "W]hen looking at how race operates as a modality of extracting labor or service for the accumulation of either imperial lucre or commodity capitalism, or simply for gratuitous expenditure more generally...it is important to note the feelings of tenderness that are consequently shut down in the instrumental regard for the racial other as primarily a worker-servant or competitor for scarce resources. We often turn to literary forms for a thick (and usually verbally adept) description of how it feels to be subject to the color line, to be epidermally profiled, displaced from home...and denied companion relationality." Rachel C. Lee, The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America, 220.

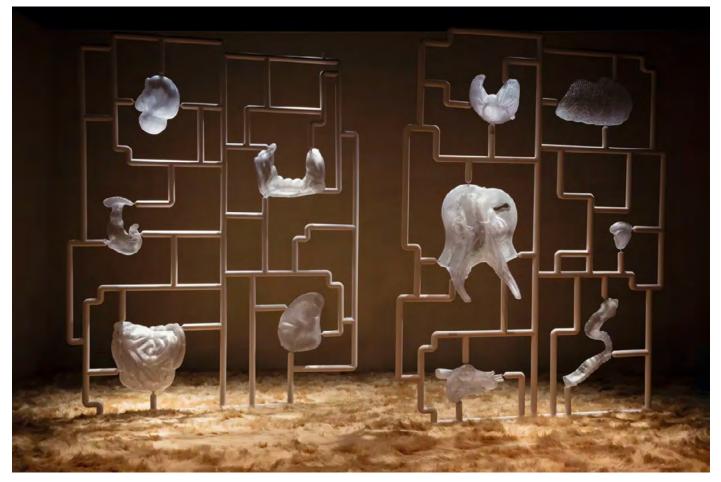
[15] https://frieze.com/article/miracle-creation-jes-fan-and-craft-engineering-kinship by Hera Chan, March 30, 2018.

[16] See epigraph and footnote #1, above.



## Jes Fan makes work free of gender binaries

Glenn Adamson 30 August 2018



Visible Woman, Jes Fan, 3D-printed resin, PPE pipes and pigments, diptych. Photo: Courtesy of Empty Gallery and the artist

Jes Fan has a way of getting your attention. Last time I talked to the Brooklyn-based artist, for example, they said: 'There's nothing more surreal than holding your mom's excretions in your hand while they're still warm.' They were just back from mounting the exhibition 'Mother is a Woman' at the Empty Gallery in Hong Kong (27 March – 2 June 2018). As part of the show, Fan had isolated oestrogen from their mother's urine, and then used it to make a beauty cream. Any visitor who wished to do so could apply it to their skin, and absorb a very small amount of Mrs Fan's hormones – figuratively allowing the milk of womanhood into their pores.

We hear a lot these days about gender fluidity. It remains unusual, though, to encounter work that is truly free of male/female binaries. It's even more unusual in the craft domain, which is often freighted with stereotypical gender coding. Advertisements promoting artisanal product lines tend to feature 'horny-hand-ed men in leather aprons' – as Grayson Perry memorably put it – or carefully coiffed women in chic attire, unsuited to a real workshop. Even in the progressive pages of Crafts magazine, you will rarely encounter departure from gender norms. None of this seems to bother Fan in the least. As they put it, with subversive good humour: 'I think everyone is queer, in their own way.'

Make no mistake, Fan is definitely a maker. Research projects like the oestrogen face cream are important to their practice (they have also made testosterone soap), but they originally come from a strong background in studio glass, having trained in the medium at the Rhode Island School of Design. Fan remains interested in the medium's potential to serve as a metaphor for flow. In their Diagram series, inspired by scientific diagrams of melanin production, Fan mounts hand-blown elements onto structures made of a synthetic compound called Aqua-Resin. This plaster-like material is sanded to skin-like smoothness; the glass seems to seep inexorably out of the sculptures, making them feel weirdly alive.



Mother Is A Woman and Diagram I, by Jes Fan (both works 2018). Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

The centrepiece of Fan's Hong Kong exhibition was a double screen with initially unidentifiable biomorphic shapes perched upon it. It was based on an instructional toy called The Visible Woman that they found discarded on a street in Brooklyn, which modelled female anatomy in translucent plastic. Fan enlarged the kit back to something like human scale, rendering the body parts in 3d-printed resin. Though the work's geometrical matrix looks something like historical Chinese architecture – an intentional allusion – it too is derived from the snap-off design of the toy. The screen preserves the original source's combination of scientific precision and grotesque horror, but also possesses a serene, diaphanous beauty.

#### "There's nothing more surreal than holding your mom's excretions in your hand while they're still warm"

### Jes Fan

It's a great example of the way that Fan has extended the skill set of craft into unexpected places. 'My study in glass has deeply altered the way I approach any material,' they told me. 'I have a deep intimacy with material-based processes, which often translates through the haptic quality of my sculptures. The sense of touch is critical to me in the making and interpretation of the work. However, unlike most of the craft community, I am not interested in the virtuosity of techniques. I think techniques and processes often get muddled, and I am quite certain that they are not synonymous with each other.'

What Fan points to here is methodology that exceeds not only normative gender boundaries, but also the artificial divide between craft and engineering. They have collaborated extensively with lab technicians in realising their work: do we need to start understanding hormones as an artisanal medium? Or consider the title of Fan's show: at first, it seems the very definition of self-evident. What would a mother be, if not a woman? But once maternal femininity has been bottled and dispensed to the public, even that foundational identity comes to feel too slippery to grasp.

Porosity, taken to such extremes, can seem vertiginous. Many believe that we are entering an unprecedented period in history. Fixed categories of sexuality, ethnicity and class will recede. Identity will become thoroughly labile, something to enjoy, not inhabit. Fan is not alone in imagining such a world. But they are among the first to show what it will look like.



# Views

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Front: Jes Fan, *Diagram I*, 2018 Back: *Mother Is A Woman*, 2018 Left: *Visible Woman*, 2018

Jes Fan "Mother Is a Woman" Empty Gallery 27.03. – 02.06.2018

A shimmering sensuality was afloat throughout "Mother Is a Woman", artist Jes Fan's first solo exhibition in Asia. Within this gesamtkunstwerk, walls were lacquered in skin-toned paint or poured with silicone, lights were dimmed, floors covered in nude synthetic fur, and a dangerously seductive sound whispered intermittently. Fan injected the gallery architecture with a defiantly queer erotic, and transformed it into a breathing body in which the dichotomy of inside-outside, so often perpetuated by heterosexist performance to sustain gender identification and rituals of exclusion, melted. Here we were at once inside this robust body and sliding on top of its soft skin. If architecture and sculpture can be rightly defined as the material practice of composing substances into a tangible presence, then the somatic equivalent of the two related disciplines would be biology, which informs the body's structure and capacities. Fan is fascinated by the materiality of things, from the biology of sentient beings to the texture and tactility of the non-living. Just as the body is never an impermeable, closed form, recent perspectives in ecology remind us of the interdependence of all forms of existence. Fan gestures toward this ecological intimacy through a series of sculptures, titled "Diagram" (2018), that seem as if they just grew out of the fury floor and nude walls. In their basic structure, these sculptural objects reference clinical diagrams of the epidermis, the outermost layer of the skin responsible for the majority of variations in skin colour in humans due to the amount and distribution of melanin pigment that it contains. Fan applies coloured aqua-resin, layer upon layer, onto their surfaces and then laboriously sands them down to expose the melting of myriads of flesh-toned shades into one another, alluding to the artificiality of racialisation. With tentacle-like glass globules added onto their joints, these enlarged, three-dimensional diagrams appear more like animated shelves and tables, or organic life-forms in which various kinds of matter support each other and undergo co-evolution. Through any adept play with materials and forms, Fan creates strange objects gleaming with animacy, destabilising further sets of dichotomies, like subject and object, alive and inert.

The central work of the exhibition, Mother Is a Woman (2018), consists of an unusual beauty cream as well as a video documenting its production. Prima facie, "mother is a woman" is a tautology. But in this gesture, Fan beckons us to put the veracity of the work and its many connotations under scrutiny. The beauty cream is infused with oestrogen extracted from the artist's mother's urine, which was shared during the exhibition opening as staff applied it to the willing visitor's skin. By allowing the hormone to seep into their body, users would become sutured into a strangely intimate web of relations with Fan's mother that upset the conventional, binary association between blood ties and kinship. I was reminded of Elizabeth Freeman's conceptualisation of kinship as a "technique of renewal": the process by which "bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created. transformed, and sustained over time." "Mother Is a Woman" challenged the view of kinship as corporeal dependence by showing how biological attachment can, in fact, be engineered and how it is always inseparable from cultural reproduction (the mother teaching her kin the notion of beauty and femininity by endowing her with a beauty cream). But rather than an endorsement of biotechnology, Fan's investigation into kinship and animacy is more of a provocation, and an invitation to imagine a different way of being-with, enmeshed in strange intimacies. Alvin Li

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#### JES FAN: THEORY FORGETS THAT WE ALL HAVE MEMBRANES Post in: Features Latest posts Web Exclusive | May 31, 2018 | Seetoh Ming



Jes Fan, Mother Is A Woman, 2018, video, sound, color, 4 min 44 sec. Videographer: Asa Westcott.



Visible Woman, 2018, 3D printed resin, PPE pipes and pigments Diptych, 152 x 196 x 15cm each. Image courtesy of Empty Gallery



Diagram I (detailed), 2018, aqua resin, epoxy, aluminum, glass, and fiberglass, 110 x 218 x51cm. Image courtesy of Empty Gallery



View of "Jes Fan: Mother Is a Woman," 2018, Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Image courtesy of Empty Gallery

What is a body made of, and how does that impact the way it is perceived? Does an impression of a body reflect its constitution? Artist Jes Fan posits these queries by investigating how the material science of a body, its minute makings, affects its external, overarching perception. Fan goes about their work by astutely eschewing the trendiness of burgeoning images or discourses around the body. Instead, they probe deeper into its fleshy, molecular insides for a more honest viscerality. This is not a teleological or predictable inquiry for Fan, but rather, an investigative, open-ended one. They do not appear to be interested in proving fact or buttressing widespread truths or assumptions about identity. Rather, they are rooted in the integrity of embodiment — what we are truly made of.

In their recent exhibition at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery, Fan intentionally transformed the gallery space by adorning the walls in flesh-toned hues and the floors in pink faux fur carpet. Tactility abounds in Fan's environment. The gallery becomes a body, a vessel, ferrying its visitors on aqueous tunnels to other kinds of sensorial, skin-close encounters. Fan invokes embodiment in the very structure of the gallery itself. Their exhibition seems to inhabit our senses — it even looks and smells like a body. In a side room, walls drip with viscous prosthetic silicone, eerily resembling melting flesh. Slug-like glass globules snake around and over other installations, like animated organs exploring the insides of a body. Synthetic yet sensate, Fan's spatial manipulation both evacuates and overwhelms notions of bodily presence. Their presentation recalls and yet is deeply estranged from the idea and image of a body.

Discussions about the body and transgender life are inextricable. Although Fan does not avoid the matter of transgender identity, they complicate its trite representations by unearthing its rawest compositions. By employing soy beans and mimicking yams in many of their works, Fan heavily references two essential ingredients used to manufacture sex hormones. In the video work Mother Is A Woman, fingers seductively apply a plain white estrogen cream that Fan produced from their mother's urine. In these works, Fan extracts the basal, unspectacular, and even scatological essence of transgender embodiment. As performance studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro incisively observes: transgender is usually theorized as "transgressive" and "exceptional," while "the everyday and unexceptional character of transgender experience receives little attention." [1] Likewise, Fan introspectively reveals that what transgender people have to live with hormones, guts, and excretions ---actually helps them to live on a daily basis. In other words, Fan demonstrates how the utter ordinariness of transgender life is actually extraordinary and life-sustaining.

Other works underscore the ripeness of banality as a medium for transgender fulfillment. Although appearing more outlandish than functional, Fan's "Diagram" series look like shelves, tables, and benches, furniture that make a home livable. Theirs is a utilitarian surreality that accurately encapsulates the complexities and contradictions of lived transgender experiences. The surfaces of Diagram I have been sanded down to reveal a plethora of warm pinks, dulled whites, and earthy browns, each color indicating a different layer intrinsic to the material. Although dizzyingly psychedelic, this "Diagram" series thoroughly and straightforwardly illustrate the veracity of their constitution.

The current fashionable understanding of "transgender," or gender nonconformity more broadly, is unfortunately linked to a set of corresponding images that paradoxically demarcates and delimits what alternative genders and sexualities are supposed to look like. One has to prove they are authentically trans through their appearance and personal presentation. Furthermore, labeling an artist "transgender" or "queer" as a supposedly emancipatory gesture actually achieves the opposite effect, flattening the artist's practice and reality to a passing fad. In contrast, Fan decouples the idea of transgender from its surface impressions, going, quite literally, beneath the surface, into its cellular make-up. As Fan ruminates: "theory forgets that we all have membranes," alluding to the valuable perishability of our bodies [2] In a cultural milieu obsessed with talking about and manifesting difference for the sake of being different, Fan literally withdraws into bodies that personify difference, discovering what makes them tick. Stripping away the ostentation of revelation and articulation, Fan presents the pungent offal of experience — flesh, fluids, odors, and organs — and by doing so delivers a nondescript, accountable experience of what it means to be transgender.

> http://www.leapleapleap.com/2018/05/jes-fan-theory-forgets-that-we-all-have-membranes/





# l, you, us

### Situating positions of identity in the works of three artists



Untitled (From the Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition)-01, 2014, ink on drafting paper, 27 x 19 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aike, Shanghai.



<sup>2</sup> Rodel Tapaya

Instant Gratification, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 244 x 336 cm. Courtesy Ayala Museum, Makati.





Disposed to Add, 2017, performance, dimensions variable. Photo by Allyson Lupich. Courtesy the artist.

### Hu Yun belgrade/shanghai

The research-driven, multimedia works of Belgrade- and Shanghai-based Hu Yun remind us that we are all active agents in the writing of history. Trained at the China Academy of Art, the artist examines the power dynamics that shape our perceptions of the past, by navigating archives, books and personal memorabilia to uncover potential spaces for reinterpretation. In the group of ink drawings Untitled (From the Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, 1796 (2017), which was shown at the artist's recent exhibition at Manila's 1335 Mabini gallery, for example, Hu deconstructs British-Dutch soldier John Gabriel Stedman's written accounts of life in the 18th-century Dutch colony of Surinam. Stedman's texts portray a glossy, hopeful life in the new lands, but are subverted by accompanying illustrations by the poet William Blake, which instead show the atrocities of slavery and the violent racial conflicts that occurred. Commenting on the two dueling elements, and adding his own layer of subversion, Hu appropriates the detailed renderings, selectively removing elements such as the bodies of a group of slaves about to be auctioned. The revision is, ironically, a much more faithful illustration of the writing and its gaping narrative holes.

These pockets of space that allow for viewers' own projections are also utilized in the artist's investigations centered around figures including British missionary Francis Xavier and tradesman John Reeves-both of whom played a role in China's modernization and its depiction in the colonial imagination. The Secret Garden: Reeves's Pheasant (2012-15) is an installation that resulted from Hu's 2010 residency at Gasworks, London, and was mounted at the Natural History Museum the same year. The work comprises objects that reference Reeves's travels and discovery of a species of pheasant, such as wallpaper dotted with illustrations of the bird's plumage. It suggests how exotic fantasies surrounding the natural world of the East were shaped by samples gathered by amateur naturalists such as Reeves and proliferated through institutions such as museums.

In new sculptures and drawings, Hu will be looking into Southeast Asia and the 20th-century artists who introduced modernist art to the region, probing private and shared memories that challenge colonial narratives mediated by the West. CHLOE CHU

# Rodel Tapaya

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For centuries, myths have guided us to better understand our world. But can old epics also help clarify today's state of affairs? In his work, Philippine artist Rodel Tapaya draws on folk mythology, using it as a tool of cultural memory to examine the collective unconscious. These elaborate tales are distilled to reveal current social ills, sustained by cultural attitudes lingering from the Philippines' colonial past.

Born in Montalban, Tapaya studied painting in the United States and Finland. His latest works, shown in 2017 at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and at Ayala Museum in Manila this spring, demonstrate his recent foray into horror vacui aesthetics. These paintings portray a panoramic phantasmagoria of fables from oral traditions, threaded together in vivid palettes of lush greens and maroon reds. For example, the towering canvas Instant Gratification (all works 2018), which is based on the saga of a monkey and a tortoise, is woven with visual traces of the overexploitation of natural resources, capitalist greed and the desire for immediate results, adopting a 21st-century twist in its sharp critique of postcolonial Philippine's sociopolitical struggles. Another painting, The Comedy, Parody and Tragedy, illustrates the complex, chaotic lives within Manila's slums. Here, ghoulish, milky dregs of humanlike forms slip in and out of existence, floating between cinder-block facades and tin roofs.

Perhaps Tapaya's most elegiac work to date is the claymation *Kalahati Dalamhati*, which features the fabled Filipino vampire-like being, the *manananggal*. In the film, these creatures are not blood-sucking monsters, but instead represent the Philippine migrant-worker population. Beloved husbands, sons and fathers detach their torsos from their legs to don wings and fly away, toiling at jobs in an industrial city in the sky. By the time they return home, their wives have grown old, and their sons, now mature, are seen leaving in search of a salary, with their own pair of legs left behind in the graveyard of indistinguishable severed halves.

Transposing elements of reality onto mythical landscapes and vice versa, Tapaya's interpretations of the world are ciphers that warn of a conceivable dystopia. Sometimes in situations where there is no one to guide us, turning to the wisdom of our ancestors can reorient our horizons. JULEE WOO JIN CHUNG

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#### <sup>3</sup> Jes Fan

### NEW YORK

"Bodies are not born. They are made." This quote, by feminist, bio-anthropologist Donna Haraway, fueled a talk on the social wiring of gender by Brooklyn-based artist Jes Fan, presented one Saturday morning at a symposium organized by Hong Kong's Para Site and hosted at Spring Workshop. In the same space was a scattering of "flesh-tone" silicone moldings of barbells and Nike slippers, the raised texture of which resembles a bed of nipples. That same afternoon, the works featured in a two-person performance, *Disposed to Add* (2017), directed by the artist to explore the erotic charges that can be ascribed to these soft, jelly-like objects by those who pull, tie together, coil or caress them.

The Hong Kong-raised, Brooklyn-based Fan-who identifies as "they"-graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in glass from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2014 and is a recipient of the 2017 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Program grant. Their most recent projects utilize rubber, silicone, soap and wax-materials that when mixed with peachy pigments can appear like skin-to sculpt works that discuss identity politics and the process of categorizing a person based on stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine" appearances or gualities. For example, in Testo-soap (2016), they arranged injection vials filled with depotestosterone, often used by transgender people, next to a rectangle of ivory soap. Created during the artist's fellowship at New York's Museum of Arts and Design, the work isolates the strands of gender, or what is perceived as gender, and reforms it. After scrutinizing the ingredients of testosterone, Fan had discovered that the hormone is often suspended in cottonseed oil, which they then extracted and added to a lye-water mixture, forming a bar of soap. The innocuous-looking cleanser references a process of purification-a stripping away of gender-normative behavior-and its inclusion of testosterone, maintenance, whether through hormone supplements or daily hygiene routines. The work also criticizes the institutionalization of identity in society and the accessibility of drugs, as governed by pharmaceutical companies that are literally shaping our bodies for profit.

In March, they returned to Hong Kong to open a solo exhibition at Empty Gallery, titled "Mother Is a Woman," for which they presented new works around the multifarious roles of females, including a cream derived from their mother's hormones. YSABELLE CHEUNG



## Art Basel in Hong Kong: city's small galleries shine through with memorable displays

From DNA testing to a compilation of Hong Kong buildings, from Chinese scrolls to bamboo mobiles, there were plenty of local attractions from Hong Kong galleries at this year's Art Basel fair in the city

Enid Tsui 2 Apr, 2018

Art Basel week in Hong Kong this year was a particularly wonderful conglomeration of international artists, critics, galleries and collectors. But even with superstars such as Jeff Koons and the Guerrilla Girls in town, a number of smaller, local galleries still managed to shine through amid an exhausting avalanche of visual and mental stimulation.



Diagram I (2018) by Jes Fan. Part of the artist's Mother is a Woman series at Empty Gallery.

Over at Stephen Cheng's Empty Gallery in Tin Wan, visitors were asked to put on a beauty cream derived from artist Jes Fan's mother's oestrogen, which was extracted from her urine sample.

Creepy, yes, but this gesture to "feminise" the visitors added an immediacy and tactility to "Mother is a Woman", Fan's exhibition full of corporeal sculptures.

The gallery also unveiled Xavier Cha's Ruthless Logic (2018) – a stunning film shot at Hong Kong's disused Shaw Studios that employs different action-film techniques, including bullet-time, wire-work and extreme slow motion, as two martial artists, German Cheung and Rafael Reynoso, fight with beautifully choreographed moves.

It is a tribute to a film genre that Hong Kong is famous for, and a tender portrayal of two artists' mutual appreciation even as they appear to be engaged in battle.





PROFILE - 30 MAR 2018

# The Miracle of Creation: Jes Fan and the Craft of Engineering Kinship

Fan's work manipulates the archetype and architecture of the body as we understand it BY HERA CHAN

*Visible Woman* comes in two settings: pregnant and not pregnant. An anatomical model recommended for those aged ten and up, the kit was released in the US in the 1960s following the commercial success of *Visible Man*. Illustrated instructions are provided, guiding the assembly of removable parts into a clear plastic shell. Last year, on the day after Boxing Day, Jes Fan found an edition of the toy amid the sidewalk throwaways of their neighbourhood in Red Hook, Brooklyn. In the eponymous work *Visible Woman* (2018), the artist has created enlarged, resin versions of the detachable organs using 3D printing, fixing them to a network of plastic tubes that look both like model-kit sprues and a Chinese folding screen. Evoking both the craftsmanship of the hobbyist and the performance of Chineseness, Fan puts the body fully on display without eroding the potential of its modification.

Terminology relating to gender expression changes rapidly. The instructions for Visible Woman follow 19th-century US standards in using 'after nature' and 'organs of generation' to denote reproductive body parts. Fan's work is part of a broader discussion about defining the word 'trans' – a marker that calls for the freedom of gender fluidity and non-interference in personal choices. The notion of kinship is also a driving force in their practice. Growing up in Hong Kong to a lineage of physical workers (their father ran a small toy factory and their aunt worked in a factory), Fan has long engaged with technical media, maintaining this familial link despite the typically low opinion of craft in contemporary art institutions.



Jes Fan, Mother Is A Woman and Diagram I (both works 2018). Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

The last time I saw Fan, they applied a creamy lotion infused with estrogen extracted from their mother's urine onto the back of my hand. Their mother is post-menopausal: post-woman, as defined by *Visible Woman*, which equates womanhood with the ability to give birth. This lotion, along with a promotional video, comprises *Mother Is a Woman* (2018). By allowing the hormone to penetrate their skin, users establish a physical relation with Fan's mother, raising questions about our understanding of kinship. As opposed to redefining the terms of kinship from a social standpoint, Fan researches and uses pharmaceutical hormones and other materials for body modification to determine different forms of biological attachment. In what Paul B. Preciado calls the 'performative feedback [...] of the pharmacopornographic regime', the bodily function becomes its pharmaceutical counterpart: erection, Viagra; menstrual cycle, birth control pill.

Examining the body at the molecular level, Cellular Studies (2018) is a sculpture composed of soybean capsules (a key ingredient in commercially produced estrogen and testosterone), Aqua-Resin and fibreglass. Fan began investigating the pharmaceutical production of steroid hormones while at the Museum of Arts and Design, where they were a Van Lier Fellow in 2016–17. Sculpted from latex, silicone, glycerin and injectable Depo-Testosterone, the figure of the androgyne makes recurrent appearances in their work. Iterations of the performance Disposed to Add (2017) employed skin-coloured silicone barbell sets. Manipulated by two dancers, these barbells were stretched and pulled in a slow-moving modern dance workout that reaches no climax. Performed at Pioneer Works in New York and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, Disposed to Add tests the limitations of the disciplined body in motion.



Jes Fan, Diagram IV, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Furthering these investigations into bodily limits, Fan's emphasis in their latest works is on architecture and design. If furniture is conceived for particular bodies, Fan's goopy structures are shelves and tables for a form that has yet to be realized. The series 'Diagram I–IV' (2018) looks unlike any of Fan's earlier work. Made from multiple layers of coloured Aqua-Resin, these pieces are laboriously sanded down to reveal the blending of dusty reds and creams. The limbs of the furniture-like works resemble giant modelling clay pieces with glass globules dripping from their joints. Fan describes the rhythm of sanding the works as methodically sensual, much as they describe silicone, in a January 2017 interview for the International Sculpture Center's blog, as a bodily material that always stays wet. These works are wrought with exciting tactility. 'Diagram I–IV' also investigates the body, specifically the skin pigment melanin. Fan describes skin as the 'plasticine of our psyche', a surface and container that is the basis of racialization.

Looking forward, Fan is mapping out an artist book project titled *Xenophora*, comprised of interviews with scientists. Taking the question of class and gender quite literally, their framework engages with the controversial fields of epigenetics and something bordering on radical phrenology. Instead of treating the discussion of trans bodies as an issue of linguistics, their work manipulates the archetype and architecture of the body as we understand it. It enacts change at the molecular level. After all, what counts is on the inside.

Jes Fan's 'Mother Is a Woman' is on view at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, until 2 June.

Main image: Jes Fan, Visible Woman, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Emily Colucci, "This Artist Is Using Cosmetics Made With Their Mother's Urine to Rethink Gender", them., March 2018









Photo by the artist and Empty Gallery A photo of Jes Fan's "Mother Is A Woman" cream

Photo by the artist and Empty Gallery A photo of Jes Fan's "Mother Is A Woman" cream

## This Artist Is Using Co**smistArtiMakeJWith Obsin**etics Mad Mother's Urine to Rethink Geensderine to Rethink G





BY EMILY COLUCCI MARCH 28, 2018



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Jes Fan tells us how their new exhibitiones hale to the ways get quite literally speaking. quite literally speaking.







"Mother Is A Woman is beyond a beauty" Mether" IB W Werner Method States a beauty of early erjores a monotone video by artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on by a Artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstate on base of the Hong Kong-born and New York-base of the artist of the artis artist of the artist of the artist o

Fan is no stranger to employing hormones in their work, as previously seen in their *Testo-candle* and *Testo-soap*. As their names suggest, Fan crafted these mock artisanal products from the fat found in cottonseed oil, in which they noticed pharmaceutical testosterone is suspended. Whether through T-laden soap or estrogen-rich cosmetics, Fan's art forces audiences to consider not only the performative nature of gender when applying these products, but also gender's biotechnological production.



Photo by the artist and Empty Gallery Jes Fan, *Mother Is A Woman* and *Diagram I*, 2018

Beyond manipulating hormones, Fan's work also displays their origins. Other works in Fan's Empty Gallery exhibition feature soybeans in pill casings and cast-resin yams linked together with chains, which reference the use of soybeans and a specific type of Mexican yam in the manufacture of pharmaceutical estrogen and testosterone. With both these hormones sourced from soybean phytosterols, for example, Fan's work touches upon nonbinary existence, troubling the gender binary at a chemical level.

In the middle of installing *Mother Is A Woman*, Fan spoke with them. about how they made a cosmetic cream from their mother's urine, how it felt to bring family into their work, and why they use art to explore gender and biotechnology.

# How exactly did you transform your mother's urine into a cosmetic cream for Mother Is A Woman?

I had two options: either fly to Hong Kong or fly my mother to New York. I went to Hong Kong for a meeting with Empty Gallery and told her, "Mom, this project is based on you." She reluctantly said yes. I flew back to the U.S. with the urine in these Styrofoam cooler boxes, just hoping to God that nobody asked me anything. I separated them into small containers that wouldn't exceed the maximum liquid quantities. There's nothing weirder than pouring your mother's urine into tiny containers.

I then contacted Rian Hammond, who is this interesting biohacker working on a project called OSC (Open Source Gendercodes), in which they're genetically modifying tobacco plants. I first took the urine on a Greyhound bus to Baltimore, where they had access to a lab, and then later drove six hours to Buffalo where Rian is now a grad student to extract the estrogen there. We had such issues. We first had an email conversation with the lab, who was really chill and offered use of a high-performance liquid chromatography machine, which is what is used to determine steroid use in athletes. Running urine through this machine is a normal procedure. But when Rian showed up as this queer-presenting, nonbinary femme, they were like,

"Actually, we need to talk to the ethics office." There were all these excuses. So I ended up having to do it through another method – solid phase extraction, which looks more artisanal. It's actually more interesting this way because it alludes to craft.



Jes Fan, Visible Woman, 2018

## What inspired this project? Do you see it as an extension of your *Testo-soap* and *Testo-candle* works?

The project really began when I started wanting to learn how to make these hormones during my residency with the Museum of Art and Design (MAD). My background in glass influences this kind of thinking – wanting to actually know the physical process of how materials are made. At MAD, I was going through this phase of, "Oh, I'll try this and I'll try that." In some way, Testo-soap and Testo-candle feel more like one-liners: Gender is performative. But, this project is more speculative and has a question that could potentially evolve into something larger. It feels like an iPhone upgrade, a new version.

# Since viewers will be putting your mother's estrogen on themselves, you're essentially creating a connection between them, your mother and yourself. What does it mean for you to involve family in this project?

It's like a homecoming for me, because I've never had a show in Hong Kong. Having my mother be a part of this challenges a lot of taboos, but it's also using art to open up a dialogue with my parents about my gender and my way of seeing the world, which is really different for them. Hierarchies in Chinese culture are very stagnant. People from outside the bloodline are often seen as inferior or unable to be empathized with. That kind of xenophobia is really similar to what we experience in the United States. I'm always questioning otherness in my work because I'm often in the position of the outsider.

### I also find it interesting that the cosmetics counter is not only a hyper-feminized space, but also a consumerist one. Do you see a critique of capitalism in your work?

I grew up in Hong Kong, which is highly capitalized. Everything is so much about the transaction of goods. You're always in malls and you express affection for your parents or siblings by giving them presents. There are often no words, but there's this material exchange.

I think part of why I'm so reactive against capitalism is that it categorizes people in really rigid boxes. That's the basis for how capitalism operates: It identifies who's who in order to target certain products. Now, with social media, the categories become more finessed and tailored to your psychological profile, but you are still boxed in. I'm really against that. I'm always about the space between one category and another. I don't want to be either of the options.

## How do you see the soybean and yam pieces in the exhibition working in tandem with the *Mother Is A Woman* cream?

Pharmaceutical estrogen and testosterone are both sourced from soybeans and yams, specifically a certain kind of Mexican yams. I decided to jam the yams into these chains to symbolize the interconnected relationship between one source material to another. The proposition essentially is: if my mother can alter one's status of kin or relationship to her through her estrogen in a cosmetic cream, then, if my body is masculinized by the phytosterols that are extracted from soybeans, what is my relationship to soybeans? I'm

interested in tracing not just the history of these products, but where they come from, how they're made and how we are all interrelated because of the dynamics involved.

#### It's interesting that you cast the yams out of a synthetic material.

Yes! I'm really involved with the idea of artificial and natural. We use the word "natural" as a substitute for "normal," but "normal" and "natural" are two very different things. For example, we touch phones more than a human hand. Is that artificial? "Artificial" is often the sticking point for people who say, "That's not good because it's not natural, or it's artificial." Well, then, why do you drink bottled water? Artificial and natural are juxtaposed as two extremes to accommodate our binary habits of thinking.



Photo by the artist and Empty Gallery Jes Fan, Diagram IV, 2018

# It's clear that materials and their origins are a huge part of your process. What do you think drives your interest in materials?

I think it has a lot to do with my family's manufacturing background. My grandfather owned a

tapestry factory, my dad worked in a toy factory and my aunt had a garment factory in the U.S. My family just has this intricate understanding of the process and manpower it takes to make something. I didn't actually know this until I had them help me glue soybeans, and they were so fast! I asked why and they said, "Oh yeah, we grew up in factories." I just have this desire to know and locate where things come from and to understand the dynamics involved.

# Why do you think art is the place to investigate biotechnology and the pharmaceutical production of hormones?

Because artists can do anything! Writers too. You have a relation to society in which everyone is slightly curious, and with the right amount of convincing and determination, you can make a lot happen. I don't think I've ever met anyone who said, "I hate art." Everyone is slightly intrigued.

#### This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

<u>Emily Colucci</u> is a writer, curator and co-founder of <u>Filthy Dreams</u>, a blog analyzing art and culture through a queer lens and a touch of camp. She is the recipient of a 2016 Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for Filthy Dreams, and has contributed to VICE Magazine, POZ Magazine, Flaunt Magazine, Muse Magazine, and more. Nick Yu, "Mother Is A Woman", Art Asia Pacific, 2018





Installation view of JES FAN's "Mother is a Woman" at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2018. All images courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

MOTHER IS A WOMAN JES FAN WEB REVIEW BY NICK YU EMPTY GALLERY

HONG KONG

"Mother is a Woman" is an idiomatic banter in colloquial Cantonese: a statement so commonsensical and selfevident that even a child could understand it. Yet beyond the simplistic tautology between femininity and motherhood, the grammatical construction of the statement also engenders deeper questions around agency. The word "mother" is considered highly "alive" in the animacy hierarchy of modern linguistics, a semantic principle that ranks nouns according to their "sentience" and ability to initiate emotional responses.

Thus, it seemed fitting that "Mother is a Woman" was the title of a solo exhibition at Empty Gallery by the Cantonese-speaking Jes Fan, a sculptor who challenges our ability to forge kinship with different sorts of beings, be they inanimate, mineral, queer, non-binary, or none of the above. Fan is particularly drawn to the animacy theory, proposed by queer studies academic Mel Y. Chen, that questions the humanly imposed division between living and dead, animate and inanimate matters, and how this contrast intersects with sexuality, race, and our environs.

In the show, Fan immersed viewers into an Ovidean world of multispecies metamorphoses, accessible by descending a staircase into the exhibition space. The artist had transformed the gallery's black box by lining the floor generously with dusty-pink faux fur and painting the walls in a neutral greige tone. Visitors' relationships with the floor was marked by the footprints left when walking around the space. This augmented the feeling that one was being gently pushed to form a relationship with the inanimate objects in the space—which in the absence of natural light, evoked a chthonic world, replete with its host of ahistorical mythical creatures, objects and scenery. In rebellion of the tabula rasa of the white cube or the inert anonymity of the black box, Fan opted for an encompassing and corporeal setting that affects viewers and is reciprocally affected by them.

Across from the staircase and occupying the length of the sidewall was a two-tiered horizontal sculpture, titled Diagram I (2018). The sculpture features fiberglass-coated aluminum rods, which support two slabs that Fan had crafted by applying layers upon layers of epoxy resin, and sanding the surfaces to reveal undulating patterns of colorful strata, like those in sedimentary rocks. From this structure, tubular glass and resin tendrils and blobs curl, loop and dangle sluggishly like polyps in a coral reef. Though created from lifeless polymer and metals like epoxy resin and aluminum, the work was transformed, through Fan's hands, into a metaphor for ecological engagement and multispecies kinship.



JES FAN, Mother is a Woman, 2018, still image of HD video with color and sound: 4 min 43 sec.

The waist-height Diagram I also resembles a beauty counter table. Projected on the wall above it was a video documenting the process by which the artist infused estrogen, extracted from their mother's urine samples, into a beauty cream, titled "Mother is a Woman." A voiceover in the video beckons: "Mother is a woman. Who are you to her? Who are you to me? Kin is where the mother is." The estro-mom cream was offered to feminize attendees of the exhibition opening, an experiment that tested the receptivity of the viewer toward human kinship.

This was also reflected in the faux fur flooring, which resembles a thick layer of hair that blocks the surface of skin, essentially barring anything—estrogen, water, oil—from being absorbed into the body. In this way, the artist recognizes the limitations of the current heterohormonal biohacking technologies, and suggests that intersectional animacy beyond the molecular level of the beauty cream will require more radical effort.



Exhibition view of **JES FAN**'s (from left) Forniphilia II, 2018, aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood and artificial fur, 38  $\times$  35  $\times$  20 cm; Forniphilia I, 2018, aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood and artificial fur, 38  $\times$  35  $\times$  20 cm; Diagram II, 2018, aqua resin, epoxy, aluminum, glass and fiberglass, 142  $\times$  71  $\times$  46–120 cm;; and Yam Chains, 2017, aqua resin, pigment, metal chains, dimensions variable, at "Mother is a Woman," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2018.



**JES FAN**, Forniphilia II, 2018, aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood and artificial fur,  $38 \times 35 \times 20$  cm.

Throughout the exhibition, there was a distinct sense that Fan was attempting to establish non-hierarchical, non-anthropocentric and decentering viewpoints that invited viewers to stand or crouch closer to the work. An example of this was Forniphilia I & II (2018)-the term for the desire to become an object. The work, a sculpture placed on a wall pedestal slightly lower than eye level and lined with artificial fur, is comprised of aqua resin fragments molded from the pierced nipple, chests and shoulders of Law Siufung, a genderqueer bodybuilder from Hong Kong. Another twotiered resin sculpture, Diagram II, contains laxly supported aqua resin slabs that droop and relax on the floor, beneath a resin cast of a yam, which was hung overhead on a chain. To fully experience all these pieces, one had to bend, kneel, stare, crane and gaze-effectively relinquishing the bipedal uprightness of humans, and instead coming down or up to the level of these terran critters and chthonic beings. The placement of objects in the space provided a deeper system of coexistence and animating principle around the visibility of non-binary beings in contemporary society. In "Mother is a Woman," Fan has created a safe space for these marginalized or unseen beings to bond, or to simply be alive.

Vincy Chan, "Patching queer art in Hong Kong with Jes Fan", Still/ Loud, 12 September, 2017

STIL /LOUD

### Patching queer art in Hong Kong with Jes Fan

September 12, 2017 by Vincy Chan



Dancers perform "Disposed to Add," directed by Jes Fan. Wilfred Chan, Still / Loud

## Jes Fan's mesmerizing work is centered on gender and identity, often made with everyday materials.

Tension rose in the spacious Wong Chuk Hang loft as two dancers entangled into a knot of toned, contorted limbs. The two engaged in an elegant tug-of-war, binding and releasing themselves from limp barbell parts made of silicone.

The performance "Disposed to Add," directed by artist Jes Fan, was part of the keystone event for Para Site's recent show In Search of Miss Ruthless. The exhibition explored pageants, a televised space often perceived to be apolitical, to explore the connection of Asian diasporic community and to hold space for alternative forms of political participation. Raised in Hong Kong and now based in Brooklyn, New York City, Jes was one of the 23 artists participating in the group show.

#### Artist Jes Fan. Wilfred Chan, Still / Loud

Jes Fan's mesmerizing body of work is centered on gender and identity, often made with everyday materials. From soap barbells, silicone weight plates to two hairbrushes connected with black hair in place of bristles, the reincarnation of familiar objects probes us to rethink "the signifier we inscribe in these objects." Simultaneously, the artist seeks to break down the barriers in Hong Kong to a more open contemporary art and queer discourse.

I've known Jes for years — they exude an air of self-assuredness and candor that brings me back to our high school art studio. Always an acute observer and critic, their commentary is succinct and matter-of-fact, yet leaves one with ample room for reflection and re-imagination.

Now Jes seldom returns to Hong Kong, save for short family visits in the past couple of years. Their recent residency at Spring Workshop was an opportunity for them to be "more immersed in the spring of the local art scene."

Speaking to me, Jes is critical of the scene, observing how it reflects Hong Kong society's striving for sameness. They point out the overplayed narrative of the struggling local artist, and the insistence of pinpointing "local culture."

#### Silicone barbells for "Disposed to Add," by Jes Fan (2017). Wilfred Chan, Still / Loud

Cantonese is central to any discussion about the "local culture." The inaccessibility and unavailability of language is a running thread in our conversation. Jes recalls the struggles of discussing art in Cantonese growing up. "靚 doesn't mean anything. 可愛 doesn't mean anything. Cantonese is a beautiful language, but so many words through disuse [get lost.]" For Jes, a transgender artist, the struggle extends beyond art discourse.

"The vocabulary to describe certain ways of queerness in Hong Kong is unavailable," they add. A common criticism of the discourse on identity politics is its American-centrism. Jes stresses on the responsibility of "writers and culture movers to do the baseline work," allowing locally-relevant conversations to take place, while admitting that identity politics is in itself a privilege as it "requires a certain layer of language and education."

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Art spectators, untrained or otherwise, love a good story. But Jes wants to dismantle the romantic myth of a singular heroic artist. They are keen on making collaborative work — inspired by their background in glass-making — with people of different expertise and from different fields. "I can't do everything. It takes a village," they say.

In a memorable workshop called "Feminine Essence," the artist demonstrated with artist and biohacker Mary Maggic how to extract estrogen from urine using a DIY contraption. Jes sees collaborations like this as a way to build bridges and close gaps between dialogues. "Patching is a great word but I can't sew," they joke.

#### In "Feminine Essence," Jes Fan and Mary Maggic demonstrate DIY estrogen extraction. Wilfred Chan, Still / Loud.

Jes Fan hopes their art will pique people's interest in identity politics and instigate conversations on the topic. "It's a very Chinese thing that acceptance doesn't require understanding," they said while describing interactions with their family about queerness.

Much like queerness, art is an experience: it isn't a thing you just look at. They drew this parallel when they tried to explain to their mom what they do: "Have you walked into a jewelry store? Let's say you went to Tiffany and bought a ring. What you buy is not just the ring, or the silver. It's the seat you're sitting on. It's the glass they display the ring on. It's the whole packaging. I think using that metaphor is, sadly, much easier for Hong Kong people to understand art is immersive."

Despite Hong Kong's flaws, the artist remains hopeful for the metropolis' potential to nurture a local art scene with more diverse representation, and to hold space for sophisticated conversations around queer politics. "Hong Kong is a patching of different influences. It's so dynamic and that's what I find attractive. Hong Kong is really fucking beautiful."

Jes Fan's work was part of Para Site's recent show "In Search of Miss Ruthless." Their work can be viewed online at jesfan.com. Still / Loud's Wilfred Chan contributed reporting and editing; Holmes Chan contributed editing.

Editor's note: a quote from Jes Fan, included in the previous version of the article, has been removed at their request.

# THE NEW YORKER

ART

blows up, and sets fire to another, named Wontkins. (Note that some monitors require your own earphones.) Best of all is a blank blue head next to a tray of accessories. Nothing in the show conveys the creative achievement of Henson and company as magically as adding a pair of eves, a purple nose, arc in unison for a crescendo, which concludes in front of bleachers—visit late in the day and watch the sun set. *Through March*, 2018. (*The High Line*, W. 30th St., at 11th Ave. 212-500-6035.)

"Body, Self, Society: Chinese Performance

### GALLERIES-BROOKLYN

#### "From Dada to Ta-Da!"

Nathaniel de Large's "PawPrints," a small needlepoint reproduction of Vermeer's "Milkmaid," stuffed with catnip and attached to the bottom of the gallery's door, introduces visitors to riffs on the Duchampian readymade by eighteen artists for whom nothing is quite as it seems. In "Resistance Training," by Jes Fan, a barbell weight made of Barbie-pink silicone rests on the corner of a pedestal, slowly breathing in and out. "Vegetarianism the First 24 Hrs.," a light box by Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman, looks like a takeout menu, except that the food in each of the eight pictured dishes has been arranged into a smiley face. The five shiny tools that are Nick van Woert's contribution were made from a melted-down bronze garden statue of a boy holding a golf club. The show was curated by Max Wolf, with an eye on art as a hustle. Through Aug. 20. (Fisher Parrish, 238 Wilson Ave., Bushwick. fisherparrish.com.)

#### GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

#### "Elaine, Let's Get the Hell Out of Here"

The title of this eclectic show refers to an anecdote, relayed by Elaine de Kooning, about her fellow-painter Joan Mitchell's response when a man approached them at a cocktail party, in the early sixties, and asked, "What do you women artists think?" The show's curator, Ashton Cooper, unites works by thirteen artists spanning sixty years, from de Kooning's por-trait "Edwin Denby" (1960) and an untitled blue-and-red pastel scrawl (1991) by Mitch-ell, to two diffident figure drawings (2007) by Ralph Lemon, who is better known as a choreographer. Highlights made this year include Sheila Pepe's sprightly installation of brightblue rope, titled "On to the Hot Mess," Deborah Anzinger's not quite figurative painting, and Vanessa Thill's brownish, T-shaped "Petro-Queen II," made using industrial products on paper, which feels like a relic from the future. Cumulatively, the works convey a gestural élan that is both formally rooted and idiosyncratic. Through Aug. 18. (Beauchene, 327 Broome St. 212-375-8043.)

#### GALLERIES-BROOKLYN

#### "From Dada to Ta-Da!"

Nathaniel de Large's "PawPrints," a small needlepoint reproduction of Vermeer's "Milkmaid," stuffed with catnip and attached to the bottom of the gallery's door, introduces visitors to riffs on the Duchampian readymade by eighteen artists for whom nothing is quite as it seems. In "Resistance Training," by Jes Fan, a barbell weight made of Barbie-pink silicone rests on the corner of a pedestal, slowly breathing in and out. "Vegetarianism the First 24 Hrs.," a light box by Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman, looks like a takeout menu, except that the food in each of the eight pictured dishes has been arranged into a smiley face. The five shiny tools that are Nick van Woert's contribution were made from a melted-down bronze garden statue of a boy holding a golf club. The show was curated by Max Wolf, with an eye on art as a hustle. Through Aug. 20. (Fisher Parrish, 238 Wilson Ave., Bushwick. fisherparrish.com.)



On Aug. 19, MOMA opens "Lone Wolf Recital Corps," an exhibition—and, next month, a series of live events—dedicated to the performance collective founded, in 1986, by Terry Adkins (1953-2014), the polymathic American musician and artist. (His 1995 sculpture "Last Trumpet" is depicted above.)

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## Hong Kong art show on beauty pageants, In Search of Miss Ruthless, explores themes surrounding the contests

Curators have brought together works from 23 international artists in the style of a pageant, with the public asked to vote for the "most ruthless" pieces

Enid Tsui 26 Jul, 2017



In Search of Miss Ruthless at the Para Site Gallery in Taikoo is open until September 10. Photo: James Wendlinger

The two young curators of the "In Search of Miss Ruthless" exhibition have struck gold with the theme of beauty pageants. The dynamic exhibition, at Hong Kong's Para Site gallery, explores the theme through gender, race, role playing and power structures.

Not only does the exhibition explore pageants, but Hera Chan and David Xu Borgonjon have also cleverly brought together works from the 23 international artists in the style of a pageant. Visitors can vote for the entry that they think is the most ruthless; a reference both to the cutthroat rivalry seen in pageants and the democratic selection process offered by the Miss Hong Kong contests since 2012 (though organiser TVB is currently reviewing the judging process).

The "One Person One Vote" selection method has produced at least one Miss Hong Kong who defies some stereotypes of a beauty queen. Louisa Mak Ming-sze, an outspoken Cambridge graduate crowned in 2015, collaborated with New York-based artist Wong Kit-yi on a series of text-based works for the exhibition.

The fact that some participants in these contests have progressive views on beauty and femininity doesn't rid beauty pageants of their image of being superficial contests. Overseas ethnic pageants, such as all the Chinatown beauty contests out there, are also criticised for reinforcing orientalism in the West.

This idea prompted Chinese-American comedian and writer Kristina Wong to create a fictional beauty queen called Fannie Wong in the early 2000s. Performing as the cigar-chomping, boisterous Fannie (or fat girl in Chinese), Wong stomped on clichéd ideas about Chinese women with unladylike glee. Video clips from performances and the costume that she wore as Fannie are among the 27 works on display here.

Some of the artists in the show merely use the pageant theme as a point of departure for a more general reflection on gender. Jes Fan's Disposed to Add (2017) is part performance, part installation. It broadens the dialogue by exploring transgender identity using objects such as gym weights made with pink silicone, and dumbbells made of soap and liquid testosterone.

Dachal Choi's Days You Need Love, Fortune, and Money (2017) is a series of seven photographic works resembling pages from a Chinese calendar. Each shows the perfect man or woman you can hire as a companion to show off in public on auspicious days.

Amna Asghar's series of paintings draw on the perceptions of female beauty among overseas Pakistanis, and they are accompanied by a story, read out in Urdu, Cantonese and English, about women's perception of how other women are treated in other cultures.

Most pieces are presented with soundtracks that are played through a portable audio device. Some are music tracks, others are multilingual voice recordings that provide the context for the artwork. There is a lack of consistency in the audio quality, and some of the English recordings are hard to follow.

There are also pieces that have veered so far from the theme that they look out of place and could have been sacrificed to give room to the rest of the works.

A lot of work has gone into the exhibition, but visitors also have to work hard to be fully immersed in each work due to the sheer amount of audio material and text (some of it unnecessarily obscure) that accompany each piece.

Still, it is a delightful and gutsy effort by this year's winners of Para Site's Emerging Curators open call programme.

https://www.scmp.com/culture/arts-entertainment/article/2103991/hong-kongart-show-beauty-pageants-search-miss-ruthless

# ARTFORUM

**"Stranger Things"** OUTPOST ARTISTS RESOURCES 1665 Norman St. June 9–July 7, 2017

Sculptor Doreen Garner extends her inquiries into intimacy, hygiene, latent sexuality, and racialized violence in her first curatorial effort to date. From Chicana punk tattoo artist Tamara Santibañez to Hollywood special-effects animator Erik Ferguson, the artists in this group exhibition hit Garner's themes from many different angles.

Nakeya Brown's photo series "If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown," 2014, presents quietly domestic tableaux peppered with clues to a vibrant life: 1970s disco albums, salon hair dyers, curlers, and a flowerless African violet. In Ted Mineo's pictures Mist, Not, Shipping, and Ride, all 2017, common objects are rediscovered as otherworldly specimens: Tinted by luscious studio lighting, objects such as rubber gloves and a mound of polymer clay float through bursting galactic droplets. Ferguson's Day-Glo Untitled Video Compilation, 2017, renders fleshy trunks and monstrous sexual appendages flailing through gleaming digital space. His body-horror animation corresponds with Jes Fan's futuristic sculpture—leftover props from a performance—*Disposed to Add*, 2017. Fan's tub is filled with wet, slug-like silicone tubes that seem as if they're the remains of some alien surgery.

In Untitled: Bureau, 2017, a sculpture by Garner herself, a wooden dresser bulges with frizzy black hair—her straightforward use of materials falls short of evoking the startling uncanniness her work is known for. Hair is also manipulated by Kenya (Robinson) with her suite of blond-haired brooms. These janitorial tools fitted with dangling synthetic locks, such as Reclining Blue, 2016, are a bitter statement on race and maintenance labor. But the daily negotiation of pain in black life shifts to tenderness with Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.'s photograph Devin in Red Socks, 2016. Here, a young man holds aloft a towel that conceals his torso as he poses in a bedroom. A tiny hole in his sock is a punctum—a wounded doorway for the heart to rush in.

— Vanessa Thill

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Art that Evokes the Uncanny Body

The works in Stranger Things at Outpost Artists Resources highlight the high stakes of our attitudes toward human bodies.

by Rain Embuscado June 30, 2017



Jes Fan, "(discarded objects) for Disposed to Add" (2017), silicone (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Visitors entering Outpost Artists Resources in Ridgewood will first come across a ceramic bathtub placed atop a wooden dolly. Inside, a tangle of ribbed, flesh-toned silicone tubes steeps in a bath of clear liquid. The work "(discarded objects) for Disposed to Add" (2017) — by turns evocative of umbilical cords, industrial hoses, intestinal canals, and a den of snakes — is by Jes Fan, one of eight artists featured in a group exhibition curated by artist Doreen Garner. Titled Stranger Things, the show is loosely predicated on notions of the uncanny, asserting that the pieces on view (like Fan's synthetic coils) ground familiar references to the body in foreign and unsettling contexts. The 19 works included — which range from sculpture and painting to video and photography — harmonize in this register, but isolated readings reveal distinct anxieties that also operate independently of the overarching theme.

The exhibition is bookended by Fan's sculpture and one of Garner's own, completing its continuum of works grappling with the dissonance between internal and external manifestations of identity — and, perhaps more importantly, the systemic perceptions of people who look or dress certain ways. Where Fan's piece evokes an internal apparatus made visible, Garner's "Untitled Bureau" (2017), a wooden dresser containing hair weaves cascading from five open drawers, imagines the inverse: a specific physical characteristic, black hair, tucked away, trapped, and repressed. These two works, and the pieces between them, are united by a shared impetus to convey individuated takes on inner experience. But, taken together, the works in the show converge on the painful conclusion that some bodies are made to endure far stranger horrors than others.



#### Jes Fan. No Clearance in Niche

2 Mar—30 Apr 2017 at the MAD Museum in New York, United States 28 APRIL 2017



Jes Fan. No Clearance in Niche. Courtesy of MAD Museum

Reflecting on the intersections of many identities, Jes Fan questions the concept of "otherness" by creatively exploring materials and substances with social, political, and erotic connotations. Working with latex, silicone, glycerin, and injectable Depo-Testosterone, Fan's playful, poetic objects and drawings explore transgender identity, body modification, and self-determination. Critical of stereotypes and hierarchies, Fan's paradoxical creations (a limp pink silicone dumbbell, testosterone-scented candles) greet viewers as riddles, inspiring complex meditations on the conventions and inventions of gender.

On view in the 6th-floor Project Space, Jes Fan: No Clearance in Niche is the inaugural installation of the MAD Education Department's new series Fellow Focus. Dedicated to highlighting the work of alums of the Van Lier Fellowship program at MAD, Fellow Focus invites these emerging artists to showcase the artwork they produced while working in residence at the Museum as fellows. All Fellow Focus presentations are accompanied by an artist talk and workshop, allowing the public opportunities to learn more and engage with the artist's practices and experiences.

Funds for the Van Lier Fellowship are provided by The New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellowship Program. The fund provides support for talented, culturally diverse, economically challenged young people who are seriously dedicated to careers in the arts.

Jes Fan is a Brooklyn-based artist born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong, China. They have received a BFA in Glass from Rhode Island School of Design. Fan's trans-disciplinary practice is based on a material inquiry into otherness as it relates to identity politics. They are the recipient of various fellowships and residencies, such as the Edward and Sally Van Lier Fellowship at Museum of Arts and Design, Pioneer Works, CCGA Fellowship at Wheaton Arts, and John A. Chironna Memorial Award at RISD. Fan has exhibited in the United States and internationally; selected exhibitions include Whereabouts at Glazenhuis Museum (Belgium), Material Location at Agnes Varis Gallery (New York), Ot(her) at Brown University's Sarah Doyle Gallery (Providence), and Remembering Something without a Name, Chrysler Museum of Art (Virginia).

Jes Fan: No Clearance in Niche is organized by Danny Orendorff, Manager of Public and Community Engagement Programs for the MAD Education Department.

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART

#### From a Testosterone Candle to Impossible Shoes, Meditations on Transitioning Between Genders

By warping the perceived roles and aesthetics of everyday objects, Jes Fan makes space for marginalized identities and conversations.

Danielle Wu March 30, 2017





Jes Fan, "Stranded between one act and another" (2016), polished resin, hair (all images courtesy of Museum of Arts & Design, unless noted)

Jes Fan, "Testo-candle" (2016), Depo-testosterone, lye, water, silicone base

Fan's paradoxical artworks also subvert

their service to a patriarchal system. In

the rationality of oppressive social

structures. Objects rendered dysfunctional become a reflection of

"Stranded between one act and

another" (2016), two hairbrushes

entangle with one another, with

synthetic hair replacing bristles,

capturing the incessant ritual of

If gender is learned and performed, as scholars like Judith Butler have argued, then can it also be reinforced at a biological, molecular level? Jes Fan's <u>No</u> <u>Clearance in the Niche</u> poses this question by exploring how our bodies are already engineered, and the ways we can take control of engineering them better to serve our own needs and desires.

The exhibition stems from Fan's experiences transitioning between genders and also between continents. As Fan explained to me before the opening, "I started thinking, how pervasive is the patriarchy in organizing power structures, and even bio-politically? Birth control pills are a cocktail of progestogens and estrogen. What are the feminizing effect on bodies who take birth control pills? Why are the bodies of uterus-owners policed more rigorously than others?" Fan's work falls in line with much of the current discourse about the ways that drug use and administration are influenced by cultural, racial, and gender biases. Decisions about who has access to drugs and how they are packaged remains in the hands of a white capitalist patriarchy, and many marginalized people are forced to find ways to navigate these exclusionary policies. Fan's piece "Testo-candle" (2016), a candle made from testosterone and beeswax, is of a much more welcoming shape than the sterile medical bottles placed nearby. Transforming sex hormones into familiar forms like soap and candles helps sheds the stigma associated with their usage, offering a more humanized view of hormone therapy and the trans experiences. Similar to the way Simone Leigh's recent exhibition The Waiting Room interrogated conditions of institutionalized control and the willful ignorance that caused marginalized black communities to seek alternative forms of self-care, Fan envisions ways to circumvent the failures of the healthcare system and recognize the inherently political significance of caring for the gendernonconforming body.



Jes Fan, "T4T" (2016), silicone (photo by Jacob Schuerger)

brushing long, "feminine" hair. In another, "T4T" (2016), a pink silicon dumbbell lies limply, defying the "masculine" rigidity and strength that typifies weightlifting. Fan thus calls for a softening of masculine values at a time when feminist movements are largely concentrated on female empowerment. Exercise and gyms incubate vanity as much as they promote health, so a floppy hand-weight inquires as to what society would look like if it were reoriented to value softness and tenderness over brute strength. In this new landscape, would vain objects hold the same social value, or would they become as useless as Fan portrays them?

Fan's "To Hide" series (2017) further illustrates the ways patriarchal society infiltrates our insides. Tan-colored rubber sheets feature technical illustrations that were informed by patent drawings for medical procedures such as hysterectomies and breast implants. All of these procedures were invented by white cisgender men, which points to the way our societal acceptance of body modications relies upon the white cis man as the ultimate authority. The drawings also feature disembodied limbs oating among a galaxy of ambiguous machine parts, giving the impression of a body being either deconstructed or assembled, while asking by and for whom.





Jes Fan, "To Hide" (2017), rubber, ink, piercing

Jes Fan, "To Hide" (detail) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Fan's photographic series "Soft Goods" (2017) particularly engages with the topic of race, and how skin color governs our lives. The photographs portray a darker-skinned model slipping on peach-colored Adidas slippers. Their poor fit represents Fan's experience as a Chinese person who has lived in Western-fetishizing places such as Canada and Hong Kong. Fan spoke specifically about Chinese people's eagerness to assimilate and become "whitewashed" within the pursuit of wealth and status, an internalized racism incubated by the classism and antiblackness deeply rooted in Chinese culture. "Soft Goods" speaks to the complicity involved in proliferating white supremacy within the marketing of goods, product design, and the standardization of a lighter-skinned ideal. This accountability is a rare component of socially engaged art, which in this case speaks to the East Asian experience as one that has both contributed to and been damaged by racist systems.



By warping the perceived roles and aesthetics of everyday objects, Fan makes space for multiple marginalized identities and conversations. Fan asks a question that simmers beneath many current national discussions governed by identity politics: If we are truly more than the sum of our parts, can't society allow us to decide for ourselves what our parts are?

Jes Fan, "Soft Goods" (2017), digital print (photo by Jacob Schuerger)

https://hyperallergic.com/368667/from-a-testosterone-candle-to-impossible-shoes-meditations-on-the-trans-experience/



#### Jes Fan in their Studio: The Miracle of Gender

JANUARY 4, 2017 By intsculpturectr in IN THE STUDIO Tags: JAN GARDEN CASTRO 1 COMMENT



Jes Fan, Testosoap

Hurry to Jes Fan's studio at the Museum of Art and Design (MAD) to see the wonders they have been creating between October and January.<sup>1+2</sup> If you like, return February 27 – April 9 to see theirexhibition in MAD's Project Room and plan to see their show at Vox Populi in May/June. Even after my second visit, there was too much to see in the small MAD studio where Fan is a Van Lier Fellow. As I look around, I admire their play with materials, contradictions, and ideas about identity politics, including gender and race. The pink and black barbells and weights are light instead of heavy, twisted or curving instead of straight. Jes is making hanging sculptures out of soybeans, the miracle bean that was a food staple in China since 2800 B.C. One soybean-encapsuled object is shaped like adrenal glands, which secrete the body's hormones. A silicone slab form with embedded soybeans is setting in its mold. As Fan lifts it, they relate, "Silicone is a bodily material that stays wet physically." Nearby two hairbrushes lie sideways, a long swirl of black hair (instead of bristles) connecting the two handles.



Jes Fan, Whatnots, 2016. Photo by Jodie Goodnough

Fan is casting a 150-pound barbell into silicone and aqua resin; it will eventually be embedded into a handmade glass sphere. Fan is also working on a new project pushing the boundaries of a glass technique previously employed in the piece WHATNOTS. In this project, Fan will work with publicaccess glass studios in Brooklyn and New Jersey to engage with visitors about mold-making and glassmaking techniques. WHATNOT, 2015, is cast concrete made from a ten-part rubber mold. The artist plans to make glass housing for this and has already made glass housing for other works in the studio. Their innovative glass-making processes are self-evident.

Jes told me: "My background-in glass has shaped my obsession in understanding how objects are made and where they are derived from. During my residency at MAD, I have been researching the pharmaceutical production of steroid hormones. Through my research, I found out that both commercially available testosterone and estrogen are both harvested from soybean phytosterols.

"This became a fascinating idea to me a bean as a symbol for an androgyne, capable of generating both secondary sex characteristics. Meditating on my own transition, I began systematically packing soybeans into capsules. Then I fuse the capsules into a panel by brushing water between the seams. The piece is then draped over a section of a barbell, appearing like a towel thrown in."



Jes Fan. Courtesy of Mengwen Cao

Jes has researched how hormones change in our bodies both as we age and during life changes. They mentioned that hormonal levels in our bodies adjust to stages of parenthood or falling in love. For example, aromatization is a phenomena that occurs naturally when the male body converts an overabundance of testosterone into estrogen.

"During my fellowship at MAD, I have spent a lot of time thinking why craft is often relegated to a lower ranking in the dialogue of the art world," the artist related." I began conspiring about a project based in a craft practice that is considered pedestrian and feminine. Soap making came into mind. As soap can be made by saponifying most oils with lye, I decided to test it out with depo testosterone, a form of testosterone that is suspended in cottonseed oil. I'm intrigued by the idea of masculinizing a body through the act of cleansing, an inherently repetitive act that draws parallels to the repetition that is performativity of gender acts."

"Another project that I am working on is a collage of medical illustrations of inventions that **modify** the human body. As technology offers us infinite options to augment and abridge our bodies, I wanted to understand where the line is drawn between a socially acceptable / unacceptable form of body modification. Between prosthetics and implants, between cosmetic surgery and gender affirmation surgery— how do we come to determine a procedure as 'unnatura' / 'synthetic' ? This drawing will eventually exist as a wall paper, kind of like a queer camouflage."



Jes Fan, Wedged

Fan works with weights and barbells as "an impulse to levitate an object that is associated with masculinity, not because I want to elevate it; rather, I want to suggest that it is hollow inside. Elevated by a glass bubble, its status is fragile and it exists as a prop. This project will eventually become a larger-scaled project involving a 30-inch glass bubble and a 100 -pound barbell."

Jes identifies as transgender; their presence exudes a peaceful spirit as they tell me, "I think everyone is queer in their own ways." Jes Fan's oval face and features are perfect, enigmatic, youthful. They were born in Canada and raised in Hong Kong and are newly in New York after being a student at RISD. For more information, please visit <u>www.jesfan.com (http://www.jesfan.com)</u>.

By Jan Garden Castro (https://blog.sculpture.org/jan-garden-castro/)

<sup>1</sup> Jes prefers the use of third person plural pronouns (with plural verbs). The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Lesbian, Gay, Bi, and Transgender Resource Center offers a pronoun chart with options for inclusive subject, object, possessive, and reflexive pronouns: <u>https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/</u> (<u>https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/</u>)</u>

<sup>2</sup>A gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun is a pronoun which does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed. The New York Post has pointed out that the New York City Commission on Human Rights has legal guidelines and intentionally mis-addressing trans workers may lead to fines as high as \$250,000: <u>http://nypost.com/2016/05/19/city-issues-new-guidelines-on-transgender-pronouns/ (http:// nypost.com/2016/05/19/city-issues-new-guidelines-on-transgender-pronouns/)</u>

### Creators

#### Artist Makes Testosterone Soap and Other Paradoxical Objects

Testosterone and soap seem like they don't mix, but Jes Fan explains why they do.



Testo-soap, Depo-testosterone, lye, soap, silicone base, 2016. Photo: Jacob Schuerger



Stranded between one act and another, polished resin, hair, 2016. Photo: Jacob Schuerger

While a frat party might seem to be awash with testosterone, a recent sculpture literally can be a wash with testosterone. Created by Jes Fan during the artist's fellowship at <u>The Museum of Arts and Design</u> in Manhattan, <u>Testo-soap</u> is part of an ongoing body of work that navigates the malleable space between binary gender categories and consists of soap made from testosterone. Fan tells The Creators Project how the materials they choose to work with help them to understand the complexity of identity: "For me, making is a way of knowing, and materials are the conduits to that new knowledge. My work is driven by a haptic obsession to critically engage with the cultural objects that constitute us."

The idea for the Testo-Soap project came from questioning what materials underlie gender. "Holding a bottle of T in my studio, I researched all the ingredients listed on its label, to discover that testosterone hormone is suspended in cottonseed oil." Because soap making requires the combining of fats with lye, Fan realized that the fat in the cottonseed oil that contains the testosterone could be made into soap by simply mixing it with water and lye. The resulting Testo-Soap is more than just a conceptual juxtaposition of materials; it's an ingenious feat of chemistry that references the role of gender drawing a parallel between the repetitive act of cleansing with the act of maintaining one's own gender hygiene. Whether if it has practical masculinizing effects or not I think it is beyond the importance of the piece," says Fan.





T4T, silicone casting, 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist

Wedged I, II, III, resin, silicone, glass, 2016. Photo: Jacob Schuerger

Besides soap and hormones, Fan also works with: resin, silicone, glass, and hair. And, like the Testo-soap, Fan uses the physical properties of these materials to subvert defining characteristics of the objects they depict. In a work called T4T, a barbell is cast in pink silicone. Fan undercuts the function of the barbell as an object used in weightlifting by making the sculpture out of a material that's too light and limp to provide adequate resistance for building muscle. The result is an object that represents seemingly contradictory qualities: heaviness and rigidity, as well as lightness and flexibility. The disparate collection of characteristics represented in Fan's work mirrors the complexity of personal identities and the difficulty of trying to fit them into one distinct category.

Fan is currently developing several works, in addition to the Test-Soap, that will be displayed in the Museum of Arts and Design's project space. "I am working on a set of prosthetics named Dispose to Add, made for no specific bodies in mind. Second, I am making a candle out of testosterone. Third, I am planning to show a series of drawings named To Hide, which are composed of engineering drawings of implants and prosthetics on latex. Lastly, I want to make [another] bar of soap out of estrogen, however, that has been difficult because there has been a shortage in the supply of Estradiol," says Fan.

You can visit Jes Fan every Tuesday through Friday and Sunday in the Artist Studios at The Museum of Arts and Design, and an exhibition of their work will be on display there from February 28th through April 9th. You can see more of Jes Fan's work on their website.