

EMPTY GALLERY



JES FAN
Selected Press



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Hui stages a fictional literary scandal in the form of a dramatic television interview with the reclusive author of an unpublished novel that nonetheless managed to spawn six successful films.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

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

Por Mariano Lopez Seoane
Buenos Aires, Argentina

TERREMOTO
CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE AMERICAS

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: queer, 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 queer 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

變形記 范加

Text by Samwai Lam
Photo courtesy of the artist

號外
CITY MAGAZINE



MOTHER IS A WOMAN, 2018



VISIBLE WOMAN, 2018

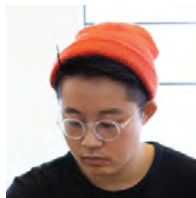


INSTALLATION VIEW FROM KISS MY GENDERS.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAYWARD GALLERY, PHOTO BY THIERRY BAL

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，人們往往視語言表達為較高的層次。」

《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。

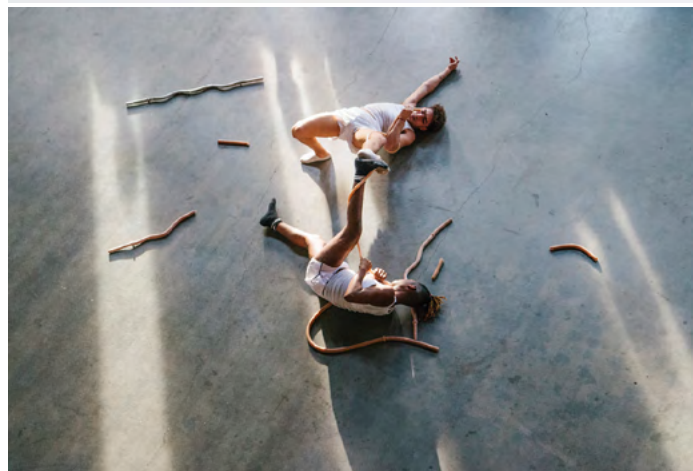
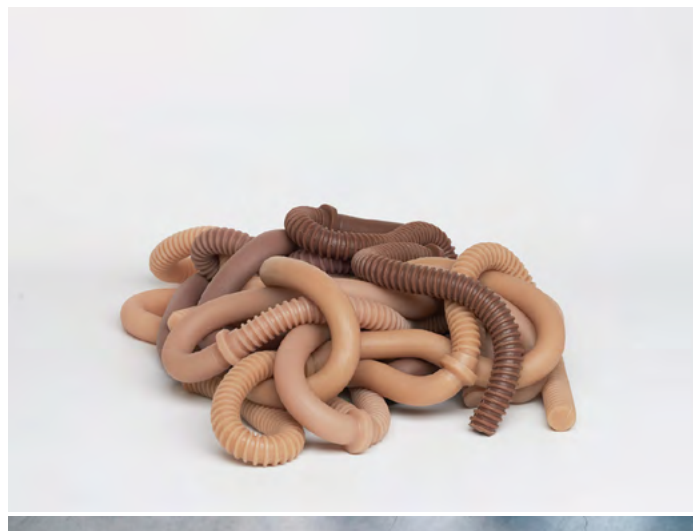
《MOTHER IS A WOMAN》令人想到廣東話俚語「鬼唔知阿媽係女人」，一如上述關於美容霜是乾淨的「邏輯」。JES戳破俚語的盲點，扭轉一些我們習以為常的觀點，拉闊對『阿媽』以及家庭的定義，在酷兒的世界，家庭絕對不只是血緣。

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（MOLECULES）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。



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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, raises—without 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

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

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

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.

Think Through Your Body

by Simon Wu | Jun 26, 2019

art21



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."¹ 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.²

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.

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

²Amia 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

art21



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

New York Close Up Series Producer: Nick Ravich. Director & Editor: Brian Redondo. Cinematography: Brian Redondo & Nick Capezzera. Location Sound: Ana Fernández & Edward Morris. Additional Camera: Nick Childers. Music: Blue Dot Sessions. Color Correction: Chris Ramey. Sound Mix: Adam Boese. Design & Graphics: Chips. Artwork Courtesy: Jes Fan. Thanks: Anderson's Martial Arts Academy, James Corporan, Cut + Measure, Alex Laviola, Miller Institute for Contemporary Art, Alex Paik, Recess, & Urban Glass.

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<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/jes-fan-in-flux/>
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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

BOMB

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.

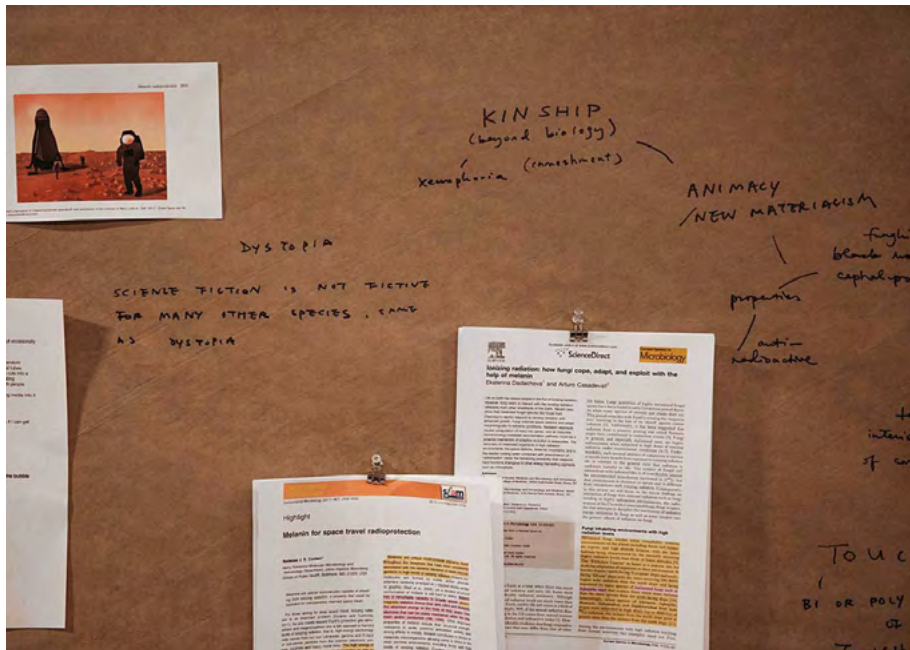


Photo: Minü Han.

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 object-making, 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.

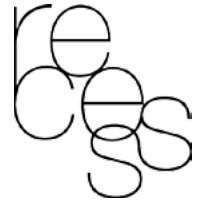


Photo: Minü Han.



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 bio-modification 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.



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 furry 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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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

<https://frieze.com/article/miracle-creation-jes-fan-and-craft-engineering-kinship>

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Photo by the artist and Empty Gallery

A photo of Jes Fan's "Mother Is A Woman" cream

This Artist Is Using Cosmetics Made With Their Mother's Urine to Rethink Gender



BY EMILY COLUCCI

MARCH 28, 2018

Jes Fan tells us how their new exhibition challenges the ways gender is manufactured — quite literally speaking.



"*Mother Is A Woman* is beyond a beauty cream," purrs a monotone yet alluring voiceover in a video by artist Jes Fan. It's not an overstatement. A handmade cosmetic cream created by the Hong Kong-born and New York-based artist in a cryogenics lab, *Mother Is A Woman* consists of estrogen sourced from Fan's mother's urine. And starting on March 27, with an opening rave on March 30, viewers will have a chance to try out *Mother Is A Woman* in Fan's new exhibition, which takes its name from the beauty cream, at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery. More than mere shock value or a critique of consumer-driven beauty products, *Mother Is A Woman* asks viewers to consider what unexpected bonds of kinship might be formed through contact with their mother's hormones.

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.

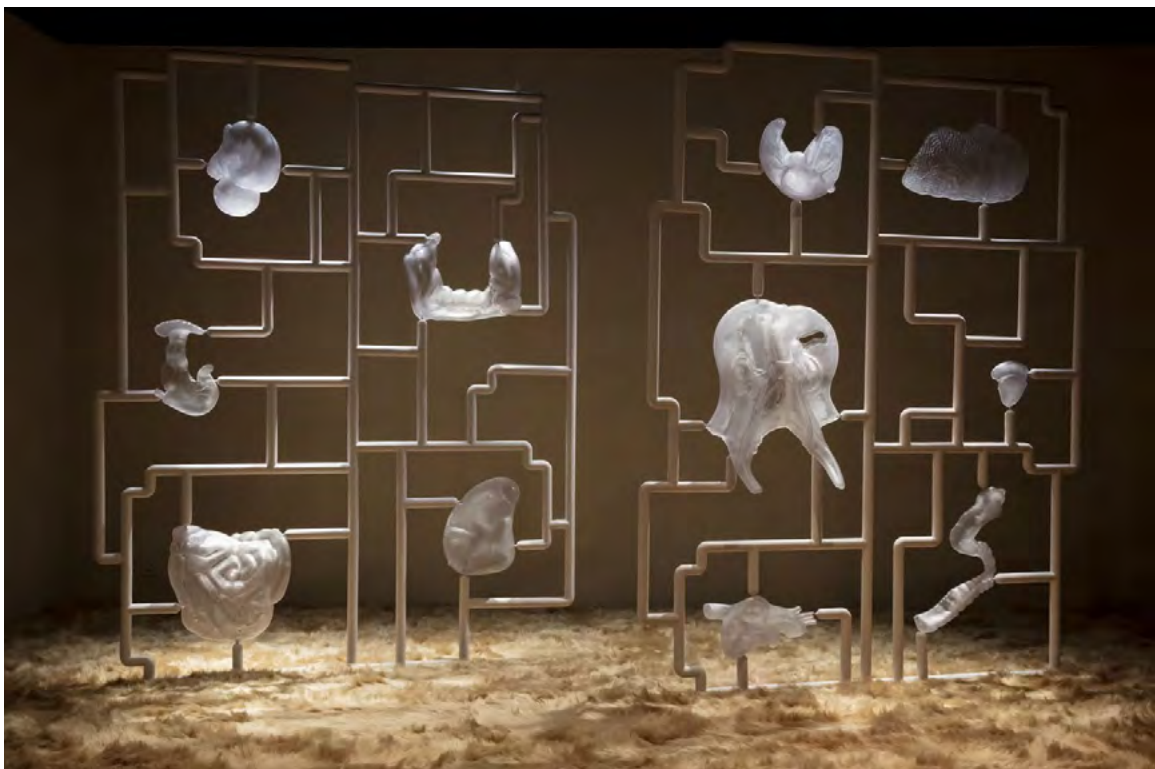
In the middle of installing *Mother Is A Woman*, Fan spoke with them. about how they made a cosmetic cream from their mother's urine, how it felt to bring family into their work, and why they use art to explore gender and biotechnology.

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.



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.

Emily Colucci is a writer, curator and co-founder of ***Filthy Dreams***, 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.



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 self-evident 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 Ovidian 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 × 35 × 20 cm; *Forniphilia I*, 2018, aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood and artificial fur, 38 × 35 × 20 cm; *Diagram II*, 2018, aqua resin, epoxy, aluminum, glass and fiberglass, 142 × 71 × 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 × 35 × 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 two-tiered 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.

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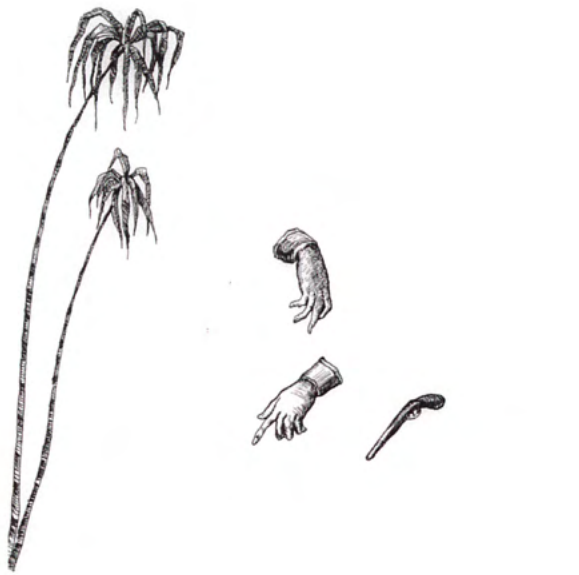
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ISSUE 108 MAY/JUN 2018



I, you, us

Situating positions of identity in the works of three artists



1

Hu Yun

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.



2

Rodel Tapaya

Instant Gratification, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 244 x 336 cm. Courtesy Ayala Museum, Makati.



3

Jes Fan

Disposed to Add, 2017, performance, dimensions variable. Photo by Allyson Lupich. Courtesy the artist.

1

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

2

Rodel Tapaya BULACAN

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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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 qualities. For example, in *Testo-soap* (2016), they arranged injection vials filled with testosterone, 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

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.

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 viscosity. 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.



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 x 51cm. Image courtesy of Empty Gallery



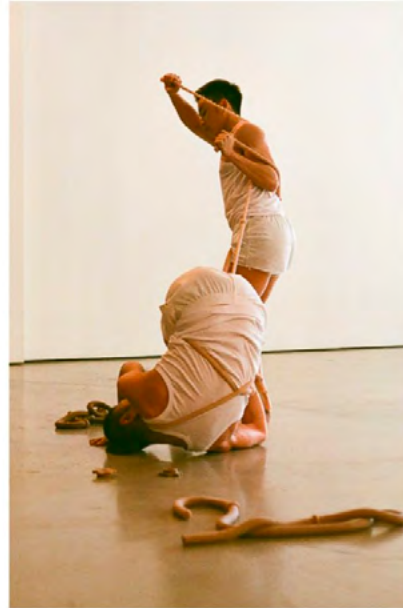
View of "Jes Fan: Mother Is a Woman," 2018, Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Image courtesy of Empty Gallery

Patching queer art in Hong Kong with Jes Fan

September 12, 2017

by Vincy Chan

Still/Loud



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.

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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 bio-hacker 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.

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.

Andrew Salomone
Jan 2 2017, 1:40pm



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 **The Museum of Arts and Design** in Manhattan, Testo-soap 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 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.

https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9anxdy/you-can-make-testosterone-into-soap-but-why

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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.

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

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 *No Clearance in the Niche* 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 gender-nonconforming 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.

Fan's paradoxical artworks also subvert the rationality of oppressive social structures. Objects rendered dysfunctional become a reflection of their service to a patriarchal system. In "Stranded between one act and another" (2016), two hairbrushes entangle with one another, with synthetic hair replacing bristles, capturing the incessant ritual of

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 modifications 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 anti-blackness 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.



Jes Fan, "Soft Goods" (2017), digital print (photo by Jacob Schuerger)

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 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.^{1 + 2} If you like, return February 27 – April 9 to see their exhibition 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-encapsulated 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 public-access 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 'unnatural' / '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 www.jesfan.com (<http://www.jesfan.com>).

By [Jan Garden Castro](https://blog.sculpture.org/jan-garden-castro/) (<https://blog.sculpture.org/jan-garden-castro/>)

¹ 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: <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/> (<https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>)

²A 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: <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/>)