To Participate in the Image: Reification & Reproduction

Justine Xi

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Xi, Justine, "To Participate in the Image: Reification & Reproduction" (2020). Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers. 78.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/78

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
To Participate in the Image:

Reification & Reproduction

Justine Xi

BFA in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis

1 May 2020
Abstract

Spanning sculpture, video, and installation, I develop my work through techniques of collage and (re)appropriation to investigate and criticize Western hegemonic perceptions and representations of the (Asian) Other. I investigate perceptions of Asianness in the Western imagination from Orientalism to Techno-Orientalism, demonization and fetishization, focusing on the circulation of imagery in art, media, and popular culture. Further, I draw attention to the internalization of these standards and what it means to participate in the construction and distribution of the image, its implications and perceptions.
Introduction

From my daily consumption of arts education, news, and entertainment, I have begun to question my own relationship to Western constructions of an Othered identity. Specifically, I have come to investigate the abstract conceptions of Asianness—What does this mean? Might it refer to nation states? Ethnicities or skin color?

Rather than focusing on the idea of representation having to do with diversity (which often actually exploits racial identity), I am interested in the construction and reification of this abstract cultural identity through the circulation of images and perceptions in the West. To follow up with my proposed questions, I argue that these representations perhaps more so define Asianness than do certain measurable criteria. I do not only attempt to reject false claims of this Othered identity, but also explore “how the West has been looking at other cultures, how these cultures look at themselves being looked at, and how (my) own story as onlooker looked at is enmeshed in such a reflection,” (Trinh 163) through my process of conceiving this body of work.

Part I: Porcelain Pugs

Early Orientalism, or Western perceptions of the East as described by Edward Said, constituted “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, (and) intense energy” (Said 118). Trade of Chinese decorative objects beginning in the 1st Century served this Orientalist curiosity, and began to acquire cultural status for Western elites. In continuation, Western art institutions in the colonial fashion of collecting art objects around the world, boast their expansive yet outdated collections. In New York Before Chinatown, John Kuo Wei Tchen describes “patrician Orientalism,” as social status for those (Euro-Americans) with Chinese
things and ideas, which strongly contrasts but also thrives alongside “political Orientalism,” in which representations of Chinese people are recast in an exclusionary discourse” (Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*).

Upon discovering studio portraits of collected Chinese decorative objects in the book: *The Treasure Houses of Great Britain*, one pair of porcelain pugs stood out to me as something perhaps “inauthentically” Chinese. I had never seen dogs rendered in ancient Chinese art, and felt such a creation would be wrong or perhaps disrespectful. Identified as belonging to the Qianlong period of the 18th century, famous for their porcelain exports, the catalog description explained the exclusive creation of these pug dogs for Western export, combining a Western interest in pug dogs with the desired Orientalist style of Chinese locality. Figure 1 shows the continued demand for these 18th Century Chinese art objects in a recent screenshot of similar porcelain pugs, priced at 15,000-25,000 USD at Christie’s auction house.

Fig. 1 *A Large Pair of Seated Sepia Pug Dogs*, Christie’s Auctions & Private Sales
Investigating contemporary desire for ancient Asian porcelain in Western art institutions, Stephanie Syjuco reconfigures images from the website of San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum in RAIDERS. She adheres the “raided” images to laser-cut wood for her own crowded display of the decorative porcelain. The two-dimensional rendering of these highly valued, rare and exotic art objects become cheap and easily accessible, defeating initial colonial and Orientalist implications of its original glass display and institutional context. Further, the title questions whether the artist is the raider or the museum. Syjuco identifies her motivations stemming from her supposed connection to these art objects as a Southeast-Asian woman, questioning the contemporary representation of Asianness as decorative porcelain in Western institutions, thereby objectifying Asian identity.
Intrigued by the history of the porcelain pug exports and navigating presumed assumptions that I make work to authentically reflect my Asian identity, I recreated these decorative objects using foam and house paint, blowing them up to three feet tall props. I couldn’t help but notice their pairing and its similarity to Chinese guardian lions. Termed *Foo dogs* in America, guardian lions continue to be desired as Oriental decorative objects, existing if not in front of Chinese establishments, then Euro-American upper-middle class homes and institutions. Created in a light, low quality material and painted with exaggerated features, the sculptures become an ironic denial of the luxury of acquiring the exotic decorative art-object.

While intending to upend expectations, the sculptures cannot however, be seen as a complete rejection of the original; for “the commercializing culture blurred the real and the stereotype to the extent that they could not be easily disentangled,” thus a “critique of the stereotype has the unfortunate side effect of reproducing a series of equally restrictive and problematic binaries: the authentic Orient versus the false Orient of Western projection” (Cheng, 13). In my refusal to accurately recreate the original porcelain art objects, my sculptures may still serve the very Orientalist desires I am critiquing, as many viewers began to see them as guardian
lions. Furthermore, if the original makers of the porcelain pugs specifically designed the objects to cater to the West, do these “original” objects belong to the “authentic Orient” or “false Orient of Western projection”?

My participation in this reproduction of stereotypes can be easily confused with the participation of the original Chinese makers in constructing Orientalism. In examining similar behavior of the Chinese diaspora in America, Tchen explains: “as Chinese people became exploited abstractions, narrow racialized types–easily recognizable and therefore highly salable,” they realized they “could be marketed and could market themselves within the confines of how the populace of European American consumers imagined these cultural others” (Tchen 11). Early Chinese immigrants in New York City for example, survived off of Orientalism: from marketing their own bodies in participating in circus-like showcases of nonwhite people as the strange and exotic to selling Oriental decorative objects.

Fig 4 & 5. Justine Xi, Porcelain Pugs (detail: stills from video), 2019
Visiting Olive Boulevard, the Chinatown in St. Louis, I place my sculptures in front of various Chinese establishments including grocery stores and restaurants, framing the architecture as *Foo-dogs* would. The fake, foam *Porcelain Pugs* are shown unexpectedly and humorously being easily lifted, carried around, and placed; sometimes tilted where the ground is uneven, or other times in front of “real” guardian lions. However, the last two locations depicted in the video take a turn when the dogs are brought to an American upper-class home, and finally to the St. Louis Art Museum.

The contextualization of my art objects embody the constructions and perceptions of Orientalism: the visual cues of Chinatown might reiterate my participation in fulfilling expectations of the Western imagination, but the upper class home and the art institution upend those initial reactions. My performance references Chinese immigrants’ performance of Chineseness in American Chinatowns, while the sculptures might perform expectations of Orientalism. My art-object insertion and disruption of these spaces both critique this exoticized perception while reflecting on the internalization of Western hegemonic standards. The looped video demonstrates the cyclical journey and consumption of the Oriental decorative art object between Chinese producers and Euro-American consumers. This satirical multi-media installation (Figure 6) complicates my presumed responsibility to authentically produce the imagination of my Asian Othered identity.
Part II: *Coronavirus* (work in progress)

Since Said’s *Orientalism*, perceptions of Asianness have both remained the same and evolved alongside the progression of technology and the changing global, economic, and political climate. In *Techno-Orientalism*, authors Roh et al. contextualize Orientalism in the information age; for example, “the discourse on China’s “rise” in the U.S. context,” which “has focused on constructing (Asian) people as a vast, subaltern-like labor force and as a giant consumer market whose appetite for Western cultural products, if nurtured, could secure U.S. global cultural and economic dominance” (Roh et al. 4). Meanwhile, stereotypes such as yellow peril cartoons of 19th century America depicting Asians as filthy and barbaric still continue to exist alongside newer fears of Asian countries’ recent global economic and political positions. In *Coronavirus*, I explore these various constructions of China, and therefore Asianness through Western media coverage of the COVID-19.
In 1992, filmmaker Craig Baldwin montaged footage of American news to create a satirical pseudo-documentary of alien invasions to reveal and criticize U.S intervention and imperialism in Latin America in his film *Tribulation 99*. In *Coronavirus*, I bring this montage tactic of satire to reveal the racialization of COVID-19 and production of sinophobia from clips of American news outlets. The video follows the progression of early COVID-19 coverage: from its origins, to China’s response to the pandemic. Combining screenshotted headlines and footage of news reporting, I manipulate the found footage through tactics of repetition and continuity editing. In Figure 8 for example, I overlap multiple sources of footage of the Wuhan wet market where COVID-19 was supposedly first discovered. Filmed in a vlog-like, tourist manner, the amateur camera chaotically transitions between various caged animals circled in red, accompanied with the same, repeated, dramatic voice-overs naming animals in a grotesque, exoticizing manner. Later, Figure 9 shows Western news anchors translating China’s precautionary measures into finger-guns to suggest violence from an authoritarian government, or describing their uses of technology “like we’ve seen out of science fiction”.

The overlapping of frenzied voices exoticizing animal consumption both enhances the fear mongering while exposing its absurdity and Orientalist implications. While the sensationalized footage of various animals in cages depicting the wet markets is seemingly used to generate awareness, it puts the blame of the virus onto those Chinese consumers depicted in the videos, not unlike historical American cartoons depicting Chinese people as barbaric and dirty. Contrarily, other news footage proclaims Chinese people as victims to be saved from the communist government, portrayed through the finger guns for example, while the sci-fi comparison exacerbates the fear of China’s “rise” in technological and economic competition with the West. Potentially seen as a continuation of cold war propaganda, this rendering of our widely consumed news coverage reveals and reifies Americans fear of the (Asian) Other in disrupting Western hegemony. Throughout this often contradictory and absurd framing of news, whether factual, constructed images of Asianness from Chinese people to the Chinese government retains a common thread of (Techno-)Orientalism.

The issue of Western media framing and sensationalizing victimhood of the Global South is specifically examined to highlight the portrayal of Vietnamese women in Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s
Surname Viet, Given Name Nam. An image from TIME magazine depicting a Vietnamese woman holding a struggling child is shown at separate timestamps in its original context (Figure 10, left) and with Trinh’s manipulation (Figure 10, right). By first showing her cropped version of the single image, then later revealing its original context in the TIME magazine, Trinh reveals TIME’s deliberate framing of the subject, collaged with white-savior images to evoke pity for the Third World woman and child. This created dialogue between the two images criticizes Western media’s role in producing this state of bare life of the Vietnamese woman, both imagined and real, commodified for Western Consumption.

Fig 10. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Surname Viet, Given Name Nam (stills from film), 1989

Pt. III: Are You Looking for Sexy Asian Women?

“She goes by many names: Celestial Lady, Lotus Blossom, Dragon Lady, Yellow Fever, Slave Girl, Geisha, Concubine, Butterfly, China Doll, Prostitute. She is carnal and delicate, hot and cold, corporeal and abstract, a full and empty signifier.” (Cheng 4)
In the computer age, circulation of images and ideas in popular culture and on the (free) internet is no less powerful than that of official media. On the internet, I encounter daily sexualized images of Asian women in advertisements surrounding online streaming of Asian melodramas and soap operas (Figure 11). The advertisements address viewers as American males, for example “Are you from St. Louis & Like Sexy Asian Women?” under images of Asian women in bikinis or anime characters with bulging breasts.

![Fig. 11 Screenshot of Online Streaming Site Kissasian](image)

Asian women have been historically hypersexualized with Orientalist implications since the beginning of Asian immigration, with Western desire for Chinese prostitutes and Korean and Japanese “war brides,” to yellow-face and depiction of Asian women in Hollywood and pornography “presented as culturally prone to sexual adventure and exotic difference,” and as “objects of white male fantasy in representation” (Parreñas-Shimizu 143, 24). In Are You Looking for Sexy Asian Women? I draw attention to the contextualization and framing of these advertisements of Asian women. The foundation of the video is a still, cropped screenshot of
four advertisements as they would appear below the screen streaming dramas (Figure 11). I superimpose subtitled clips from the dramas I am watching over the original advertisement images, focusing on scenes of the female Asian characters striving to get the attention or win the hearts of their male interests. My inserted clips are chosen to show a progression of increased female agency in their romantic pursuits, establishing a gaze from the vulnerable female yellow body where the audience become subjects of discussion in the subtitles.

Fig. 12 Justine Xi, *Are You Looking for Sexy Asian Women?* (still from video), 2020

The ability of these advertisements to continue sponsoring the monetarily free dramas however begs the question of whether the advertisements can be completely divorced from the content of the drama. As the Korean and Taiwanese dramas mostly cater to young Asian women, I began to wonder about the audience the advertisements target, and thus the potential unintentional role of these dramas in serving an asian fetish. In her *Anikora* series, Ryoko Suzuki merges real, celebrity female faces with sexualized anime bodies in her feminist critique. Though
intending to upend expectations, might the actresses in my inserted clips take on the role of the women in the advertisements?

After all, many of the images of Asian women used in the advertisements are not inherently provocative. These “poor images” were likely not even originally made for the advertisements, but “stolen, cropped, edited, and re-appropriated...bought, sold, and leased” (Steyerl 35). Without the text framing the advertisement as “sexy asian women,” many of these images look like casual selfies, uploaded by the subject to social media. These personally uploaded images circulating the web could be compared to Tila Tequila’s rise to fame from selling her nude selfies on MySpace: the Vietnamese-American self-made celebrity who “capitalized on her ‘hypersexuality...essentialized to (her) race and gender ontology’” (Shimizu qtd. in Nakamura, 1680). If we assume Asian female agency of these low-resolution advertisements, these images may also reveal an internalization of these projections of ourselves for the white male gaze, and participation in hypersexual Asian female stereotypes.

Fig. 13 Hito Steyerl, *Lovely Andrea* (still from video), 2007
In Hito Steyerl’s film *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl investigates the Japanese bondage industry in a documentary style, not only to critique, but also reflect on her own participation and reveal its Japanese female subjects’ agency. As someone who was perhaps tricked into being a bondage model in her twenties, Steyerl looks for her own image (humorously montaged in Figure 13), and interviews a Japanese woman who currently models in the industry to reveal her perspective. This multi-faceted representation and complicated critique of the industry reveals the potential of our participation in the construction of our own images.

**Conclusions**

Expanding on Anne Anlin Cheng’s critique of authenticity, Hito Steyerl similarly criticizes the “presupposition that an authentic image exists,” instead asking “what if the truth is neither in the represented nor in the representation?” (Steyerl 51). My work investigates this truth, revealing the real effects of racist portrayals of (Asian) Othered identities, which become internalized and reified in the continuation of Western hegemony.

My video, *Are You Looking for Sexy Asian Women*, received over 100 views within a few days of uploading, only having shared it with one person. Surely, the title has attracted these viewers; I’ve “engaged (in) hypersexuality...which occurs at sites of production, consumption and criticism” (Parennas-Shimizu). Perhaps my title on the surface reifies ideas of the hypersexualization of Asian women in popular media, but my intentions and reappropriations of the images also engages in changing perceptions of the Asian Other. By manipulating and reappropriating images which represent and affect my own identity, I participate in this
construction, distorting and challenging it through satire and tactics of appropriation and reproduction.
Image List

Figure 1. *A Large Pair of Seated Sepia Pug Dogs*, Christie’s Auctions & Private Sales

Figure 2. Stephanie Syjuco, *RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the A____A____M____)*, 2011

Figure 3. Justine Xi, *Porcelain Pugs* (detail: sculpture), 2019

Figure 4. Justine Xi, *Porcelain Pugs* (detail: still from video), 2019
https://vimeo.com/374561402

Figure 5. Justine Xi, *Porcelain Pugs* (detail: still from video), 2019
https://vimeo.com/374561402

Figure 6. Justine Xi, *Porcelain Pugs*, video & sculpture installation, 2019

Figure 7. Craig Baldwin, *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America*, 1992

Figure 8. Justine Xi, *Coronavirus* (still from video), 2020
https://vimeo.com/407259349

Figure 9. Justine Xi, *Coronavirus* (still from video), 2020
https://vimeo.com/407259349

Figure 10. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (stills from film), 1989

Figure 11. Screenshot of Online Streaming Site *Kissasian*
https://kissasian.sh/

Figure 12. Justine Xi, *Are You Looking for Sexy Asian Women?* (still from video), 2020
https://vimeo.com/403568405

Figure. 13 Hito Steyerl, *Lovely Andrea* (still from video), 2007
http://ubu.com/film/steyerl_andrea.html
Works Cited


