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Contemporary Art & Criticism

Etel Adnan—Marian Penner Bancroft—Noa Giniger
Chris Curreri—The Institute for Human Activities—Sarah Cale
Chiharu Shiota—Graeme Patterson—Glam North
Rabih Mroué—Akram Zaatari—Sharon Hayes—Damage Control

Location



38.75—Display until September

that deep truth: everyone is the good as well as the bad, including a desire to be better than even our friends.

The height of the conflict occurs in the largest construction, *Grudge Match*, a high-school-gymnasium-cum-wrestling-ring. In opposite corners sit not the mascots but two human male figures, one in blue, the other in orange. In the accompanying stop-motion film, the wrestlers display no chest-smacking histrionics; rather, they seem resigned to grapple indefinitely, which the looped film makes possible. Their cyclical gestures stand for the way one mentally revisits an argument and the repetitious thinking that hinders resolution. If the physical tableau of the court/ring represents the match's end, then the protracted conflict does result in a winner, but just barely: scorecards show 22 to 23. Neither competitor has an arm raised in celebration; the scene is anti-climactic.

Player Piano Waltz fulfills the Pyrrhic victory of the wrestling match. The functioning piano is topped by a wooden construction with three interior spaces: a tavern below, two bachelor apartments above. Live action and stop-motion films reveal the mascots in their lonely dotage; physically close yet emotionally distant, they're unaware of each other⁴, and the narrative concludes with a moral lesson about pride and forgiveness. It's not a tidy resolution, however, as pieces of the story are still missing: what caused the conflict? What happened to them between the wrestling match and the rooming house? (And what do the small black-and-white schematic "drawings" of the four 3D constructions contribute to the exhibition?) The viewer is left

4 Patterson explained that the two live side by side in the rooming house unbeknownst to each other; they visit the bar to play darts, etc., at different times.

in the bar, embrace in a back-chumping hug before buying a round? Or will they clasp hands and arm-wrestle on the bar, best of three rounds? Given their history, it could go either way.

But such questions are perhaps extraneous to work that deconstructs the arguably false ideals comprising modern Western stereotypes – even "myths" – of masculinity: that men must compete to win at sports, that they must be ambitious, aggressive, "alpha." It goes without saying that all men can't win all the time, as the wrestling match demonstrates.

Though rooted in personal concerns with male friendship, *Secret Citadel* is also relevant to our larger socio-political context, as discussions continue around the role of Canada's military, post-withdrawal from Afghanistan. Alongside is the growing acceptance of the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which disproves notions of men as infallible and invulnerable. And that men are pressured to be infallible and invulnerable – or are led to believe that they are – is perhaps where the trouble begins. Patterson's work also questions certain behavioural "norms": why fight to win, if winning gets you no farther ahead than losing?

Secret Citadel, with its extraordinary attention to detail, craft and artifice, offers an engaging narrative that is at times ludic and humorous. Read more deeply, and the mascots' antics parlay into a profound fable of human experience that is nostalgic without being maudlin, that admonishes without judging.

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**Neil Beloufa, Julie Born Schwartz,
Christopher Kulendran Thomas,
Timur Si-Qin, Lewis Teague Wright,
and Tyra Tingleff: Fulfilment Centre
The Sunday Painter, London
March 1 - 30, 2014
by Dan Munn**

Taking its title from the Zen-like nomenclature of online retailer Amazon's warehouse facilities, this exhibition draws parallels between the commodification of both New Age spirituality and contemporary art, and their adaptation to new forms of social, cultural, geographic and chronologic displacement. Works on display complicate rigid boundaries between what the Vatican's *A Christian Reflection on the New Age* (2003) refers to as "visible and invisible universes linked by a series of correspondences, analogies and influences," many incorporating indexes of their own production and distribution. In doing so, they resist the current malleability of art brought on through the deskilling of modernism, the apolitical focus of poststructuralism, and a partial untethering from dominative patronage. Testament to this tractability is the inclusion of Tyra Tingleff's *Respect pop, but we're broken up...* whose loose, blurred subject is built up in airbrushed oils, a medium more commonly employed in photorealism imagery. Making possible representations equivalent, its aes-

1 In *I had an expectation that it would fade (Part I)*, the artist interviews individuals who have lost one or several limbs and who all experience "phantom limb pain." Her interest in the mirror box technique of Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, used on amputees as a way of replacing the sensation of a paralyzed limb by filling the empty space with a reflection of the patient's still-functional limb, led her to work with Centroid Motion Capture (of films such as *Prometheus* and *The House of the Dead*) to transpose this visualization mechanism into digital space.

2 Increasingly ubiquitous 3D scanning and augmented reality for webcams mark the end of an era of anonymity for digital avatars, and open the door to sales-driving services such as virtual dressing room Zugar (patented in 2012) which "allows a shopper to use their webcam as a magic mirror to try on items virtually."

thetic echoes the adaptivity of New Age pluralism which, as Wouter Hanegraaff writes, finds "broad similarities between a wide variety of, 'alternative' ideas, and pursuits."

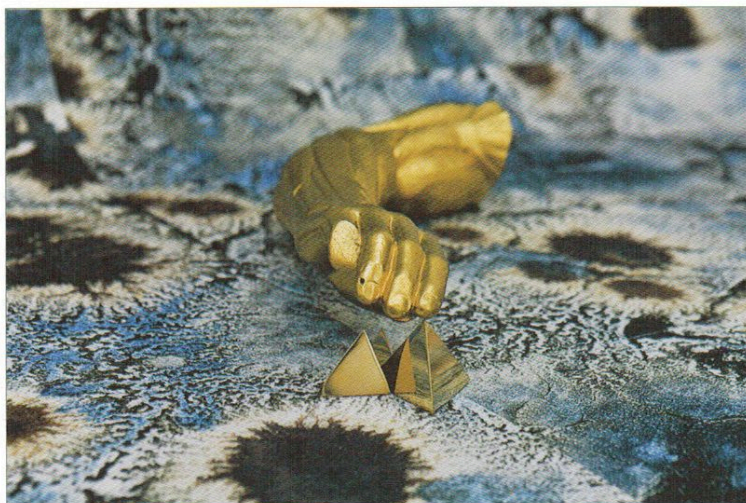
For the work *Suspicious In, For, Without Paradise* Lewis Teague Wright recreates an incidental display found in a hardware store in Benin: a piece of corrugated iron rolled up, resembling a fluted column. The copper plated wire that holds the corrugated structure in tension has been blessed by Voodoo masters, as has a small section of the gallery's floorboards that the artist carried with him. Returned to the gallery, the floorboards are not technically "on display," and the ritual which has transpired is only available by word of mouth. These interventions extend Wright's esoteric glossary of objects complicating the rigid lines dividing organic and synthetic, sign and signified. Cumulatively they hint at, albeit mostly via anecdote, the wider ecology of art which (as artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas describes) includes "all the transactions, translations and manipulations involved in its networked circulation, as well as (but not limited to) gallery-bound spectatorship."

Looking at the big picture of retail and supply today, "visible" interfaces include screen-based and print advertising, trade fairs, bricks-and-mortar stores and online storefronts, while the invisible operates within focus groups, in creative and technology hubs, logistics and sites of offsite production and storage. Julie Born Schwartz brings anatomic, personal and mystical sources onto a photographic set in *I had an expectation that it would fade (Part II)*¹. On a giclee-printed infinity curve, an arm-muscle model rests gold-painted fingers on a pair of dice-sized pyramids. As the subject of an imminent photo shoot, the mannequin-esque limb, in its hybrid form between anatomy and figurative sculpture, alludes to the increasingly realist interface between the online consumer's body and their digital avatar.² The backdrop image is an enlarged detail of a patterned piece of paper that belonged to the artist's grandmother, a bookbinder, who sadly passed away while this work was being made. Schwartz's abstract and stylized infusion of personal narratives into this marketing mechanism echoes Barbara Kruger's feminist withdrawal from representation; both demand to engage the viewer

on terms distinct from those of their time.

In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, theorist Tim Morton raises the issue of human response to a geographically diffuse phenomenon such as global warming. What becomes of the human body and will in a globe that withdraws from relation, despite (or perhaps due to) our voracity for extending our reach through technology? In *Stock Photography as Evolutionary Attractor*, Timur Si-Qin describes advertising imagery in biological terms³, where (as Deepak Chopra phrases it in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* [1994]) "the same laws that nature uses to create a forest, a star, or a human body can also bring about the fulfilment of our deepest desires." Two stock images showcasing silky-smooth skin (in a not-East-not-West cosmopolitanism, one image shows Asian skin that appears bleached, the other, tanned caucasian skin) are printed on the backside of an X-banner stand in Si-Qin's *Deliver me from bipolar spirits*, their unfocused seduction operating as emptied-out advertising. The primarily attractive images are framed as isolated romantic constructions on a non-anthropocentric expanse.

Employees of Amazon's Fulfilment Centres find themselves on the precarious vanguard of the information economy's global labour market, reminding undercover journalist Carole Cadwalladr at *The Observer* of Great Depression era stories of men "standing at the factory gate in the hope of being selected for a few days' labour." Consideration of labour and appropriation both online and across distance is integral to Kulendran Thomas' work *www.when-platitudes-become-form.lk* (2013), in which he reconfigures a charcoal drawing⁴ of the elephant-headed god Ganesha purchased from a contemporary art gallery in Sri Lanka, a country to which he has familial ties. The artist "may be the biggest collector of [Sri Lankan artist Prageeth] Manohansa at this point," and also invests part of the work's proceeds towards community-organized filmmaking by members of the Tamil diaspora. The project description that contextualizes the work's production within the economic boom following the Sri Lankan genocide is written in a documentary tone that contrasts strikingly with the temporally sensitive stylizations by which the artist juxtaposes the contemporary



Julia Born Schwartz, *I had an expectation that it would fade (II)*, 2013, mixed media installation, 435 cm x 210 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE SUNDAY PAINTER, LONDON

aesthetics of Sri Lanka and the UK. Unavoidably more a mark of the contemporary than its cutting edge, this interpretive selection of signifiers is perhaps more personally generous of the artist than his conceptualization of the work as bridging “the gap between his family’s own origins and his current context.”

A similar misdirection of the personal besets the Mali-based production of *Kempinski*, in which Neil Beloufa asked his interviewees to express their visions of the future in present tense, while keeping his own off-screen. “We move through light, through sound... from here I can get to the North Pole in half a second,” says a man standing amidst tropical foliage, illuminated only by a portable fluorescent lamp. Like an ’80s Internet utopia⁵, these futures contain buildings with no doors and cliffs that can move between continents. The immersive narratives are subtly drawn back into the material present by the everyday sets. Questioning human dominion over time and space, the film also inadvertently highlights the persistence of ethnographic distance.

The exhibition’s press release asks if we might “contemplate further and differently to the way in which art asks us to engage,” however, these lonely iterations of ancient and modern icons cannot bring their historical ecologies to the realities of contemporary art. They do however signal a departure from the romantic idea of art as something that begins in the studio, attempting instead to map its diffuse causality. Aligning art’s spectacle with the stubborn realism of today’s digital personas, these works offer their makers anonymity via misdirection and withdrawal, sometimes at the expense of their co-producers. Seeking a more holistic iteration of contemporary art within the wider ecology of art, through taking up the aesthetics of production and distribution, this exhibition engages with the politics of artistic labour and appropriation.

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3 Si-Qin discusses how stock photography employs specific colours and layouts as a response to human optic capabilities, and why a face is different from a non-face at a subconscious level, stating that “culture is an extension of biology,” and as such, “represents only a part of the spectrum of the full human/animal experience.”

4 A deity particularly worshipped by traders and merchants, images of Ganesha exist in both Hinduism and Buddhism, many regionally inflected. Manohansa’s charcoal sketch appears to foreground the anatomy and movement of its subject – the two (as opposed to four or six) armed likeness partially removing the ability for the figure to hold its customary symbols which include items such as rope – “to pull you nearer to the highest goal,” and an axe – “to cut off all bonds of attachment.”

5 *The Internet as Utopia* author Joshua Cowles describes this utopia as “a world without states in which abundant, ‘free’, information would equalize social relations and challenge traditional (pre-digital) property rights.”



Timur Si-Qin, *Deliver me from dipolar spirits*, 2014, aluminum X-banner stands, PVC blackout banner, macaw feathers, 1.9 m x 2 m x 1.8 m
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE SUNDAY PAINTER, LONDON