

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

3

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 depo-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