

Thesis Group

Dissimulating & Disheveling Matter

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Opening

May 01 2023, 16:00:00

Marble Room | School of Architecture | Syracuse University

in celebration of B.Arch thesis and Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

Contents

film, photographs, performance

About

Ngai Lan Tam (*she/her*) is a Chinese American photographer and architecture and visual culture student at Syracuse University. Her work is primarily focused on exploring diaspora culture, queer identity, and digi-physical landscapes.

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EXHIBITION
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
MARBLE ROOM

THESIS BY NGAI LAN TAM

A G O S

STARRING CAN CHEN & YU JIE CHEN

OPENING
16 : 00 : 00
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AGOS

Queerness as the Subversion of Techno-Orientalism

The title of this project, *AGOS*, signifies an act that causes disgrace, something that needs purification. Here, *agos* is queerness — a state of being that should supposedly be “purified” according to western heteronormativity. This thesis is a narrative representation of this state — where queerness manifests itself as a material substrate that seeps through the surface of the East Asian body. *AGOS* ultimately uses diasporic queerness to subvert the western gaze of bodies and environments in a phenomenon known as techno-orientalism.

Western heteronormativity and ultra-basic social binaries have plagued cultures outside of their own. By setting social and racial expectations in place, the west has negatively affected minorities and diasporic communities. The criminalization of queerness during western colonization in many Asian countries has caused it to be seen as a western phenomenon. As western powers exited and went back home to hold progressive queer rights movements, the colonized people

continued to adhere to their detrimental anti-queer colonial laws. Asian queerness has always existed but it has been denied and erased as western hierarchies of gender and sexuality are upheld.

To have a conversation about the queer East Asian diasporic experience, we must talk about techno-orientalism. Orientalism’s presence in western media’s portrayal of the East continues to be a distorted and fetishized one. Techno-orientalist tropes consist of two central themes in representing a threateningly forward future: vague and bleak Asian-coded environments, and the ‘hollow Asian’ archetype. The general and jumbled depictions of different cultures in one environment stems from the west’s view of the East as one single entity. Similarly, the ‘hollow Asian’ archetype sees all Asian bodies as devoid of emotions, free will, and consciousness. Asian bodies are reduced to holograms, sex dolls, and robot archetypes, reinforcing the claim that we are machine-like beings who lack a soul, which is the very definition of humankind.

A record of emotional and physical intimacy, *AGOS* depicts both the calm and complexity in the connection between race, identity, and sexuality. Instead of using vague Asian cityscapes to represent the future, this project chooses external and internal environments specific to queer experiences. There is the anxiety, melancholy, and soiled feelings that individuals are harboring. Through a physical rupturing of these emotions, the “robotic” Asian body is defamiliarized to challenge normativity and interrogate social and racial stereotypes. The use of queer East Asian American subjects is a response to techno-orientalism’s flawed depiction of our bodies. It shows what happens when these “Asian robots” are seen as individuals with human feelings. Their very existence is proof of how this system malfunctions when western expectations are not met.

In representing queer narratives, *AGOS* subconsciously moves towards the uncanniness of doubling. The cyborgs and the subjects are quite similar, but there are also noticeable differences in hair and accessories that cause

unfamiliarity. While they can be read as two lovers, this doubling can also help the audience read them as one mirrored subject trying to understand their own identity. This gives them an ambiguous identity between the two subject positions because both can be seen as confronting their double. All the photos have the freedom to be interpreted as two people or as one person. This invites the audience to reflect on how the act of doubling in bodies aims to challenge notions of western projections of similarity, queer love, and individual internal conflict.

The exhibition’s episodic transitions between photo, film, and performance (2D-3D) blur and glitch the line between “robot” and human. The layering projection of cyborgs on top of the photos are glimpses of how the west views Asian bodies. But even so, these cyborgs/humans are not merely just depersonalized objects. Their exterior (metal) shell ruptures with flesh, organs, and emotions, as if it is a rebellion of western perception. They are able to make decisions about identity and have optimized agencies over their queer expression.



AGOS Precedents

a collection of media inspired by and
curated for queer diasporas

Films

Farewell My Concubine
Happy Together
Lan Yu
Saving Face
Spider Lilies
The Handmaiden
Suk Suk
Kiss of the Rabbit God
Your Name Engraved Herein
Ride or Die
The Half of It
After Yang
Killing Eve
Everything Everywhere All at Once

Literature

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous
Time is a Mother
Ace
Notes of a Crocodile
Last Words From Montmartre
Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls
The Color Purple
Giovanni's Room
Minor Feelings
Techno-Orientalism
Glitch Feminism

Sounds

