

Manipulating the Mundane

Three artists from Sydney, Beijing and Hong Kong reinterpret earthly, quotidian materials and objects to address the absurdities of sexuality, perception and the private space in art



1

Trevor Yeung

Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan (detail), 2015, aquarium system with Macropodus (Black Paradise fish/Chinese Betta), Mikrogeophagus ramirezi (German Blue Ram), Scleropages formosus (Asian Arowana), Cyphotilapia frontosa (Frontosa), Carassius auratus (Ranchu, Gold Fish), Paracheirodon innesi (Neon Tetra) and styrofoam box, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.



2

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran

*Ganesh 2, 2014, white earthenware, glaze and gold luster.
51 x 44 x 41 cm. Photo by Simon Hewso.
Courtesy the artist and Gallery 9, Sydney.*



3

Liu Shiyuan

We Were Never Alone Never Bored, 2014, inkjet prints, apple and pear, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

2

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran

SYDNEY

1

Trevor Yeung

HONG KONG

In 2012, when Trevor Yeung handed out keys to his Hong Kong apartment allowing access to his exhibition “The Bedroom Show,” he elided private and public space. The show was crucial to understanding the core of Yeung’s creative ambition that seeks to dissolve an inside-outside dichotomy by stimulating the “ordinary.” A horticulture enthusiast, Yeung had decorated his personal living area with potted plants and organic experiments, including a mirror-glass aquarium filled to the brim with only water, cautiously titled *I Am Fine but Please Don’t Disturb Me* (2012). Looming over the other works was *Artist Studio Party* (2011), a projection on the ceiling showing an embracing couple, which emphasized the intimacy of the show’s locale while also bathing the room in a melancholic, forest-green light.

Yeung’s compositions using botanical elements balance the natural and the human-made, as he immerses viewers in a series of enticing visual and tangible experiences. The exhibition “Seven Gentlemen” (2011), held at the now defunct Hardneck gallery in Hong Kong, was exemplary in underscoring the artist’s ability to conceive an “in-between” space. Using his deep knowledge of flora and fauna and his trademark material of potted plants, the artist installed an indoor woodland made from domesticated palm trees—each of which were placed on a rotating platform—within a room dampened with mist and set with atmospheric light that produced an organic yet artificial cosmos inside the otherwise sterile space.

Yeung’s recent work, *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* (2015), explores his sense of displacement living in Hong Kong as a native Chinese mainland. The feeling is materialized in a circular installation of aquariums that one awkwardly enters through a low opening beneath a plinth holding one of the fish tanks, into a space that shelters viewers from the exhibition space. A sense of isolation pervades this intimate realm amid the water tanks filled with vibrantly colored “immigrant” fish species, such as the *Frontosa* fish that originates from East Africa but is farmed in China. The aquatic barrier forms a distorted connection to the exterior world and, in this way, reflects Yeung’s approach that actively diffuses natural and self-imposed boundaries.

CLARA TANG

Of the earth and thus inherently fertile, clay has been used to create anthropomorphic forms since at least the Neolithic period. Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, a Sri Lankan-born, Sydney-based sculptor, continues to work with this material today, producing corporeal sculptures that engage with contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality and religion. The synergy between his hand-based process and primal subject matter generates gloriously absurd caricatures of human and animal forms that are shaped by various creation myths and a broad spectrum of sexual cultures from across the world.

Underscoring the works of the 27-year-old is a parallel between the malleability of clay and the transmutability of gender and sexuality, as well as the religious discourses that dictate both. Among the works featured in the artist’s installation “Elephant Island,” shown last year at Sydney’s Artspace, *Ganesh 2* (2014) is a fine example of the play on these themes. Glazed entirely in white except for a gold *bindi* and a toothy smile, the clay-molded figure resembles the elephant deity bearing protruding breasts and a phallus while sitting in a lotus position. Though *Elephant and Child* (2014), another object of the “Elephant Island” suite, is different in its kaleidoscopic coloring, it is similarly bi-sexed and also brimming with tensions. Here, the elephant deity possesses a phallus for a trunk and sits cradling a white baby.

In his current works, Nithiyendran draws from the ways in which the two faiths practiced in his immediate family—Hinduism and Christianity—engage with sexuality. He explores its unabashed representation in Hinduism through the bi-sexed nature of the Supreme Being, Lord Shiva. He comments on colonial powers, working in the heteronormative patriarchy of Christian narratives and also mixing in the modern-day cult of online pornography. The unrefined, crude finish of each sexed-up sculpture stands in alluring contrast to their well-considered, loaded symbolism.

Nithiyendran’s recent works have become larger, employing new glazing techniques and engaging with an even broader palette of cultural references, including research into traditional Sri Lankan mask-making craft and European modernism, particularly Picasso’s use of African masks. “The privilege of working with ceramics is its extensive and complex global history,” the artist says. “This infinite lineage provides endless material to inspire experimentation and push the physical parameters of the medium.”

EMMA O’NEILL

3

Liu Shiyuan

BEIJING & COPENHAGEN

There is a certain clinical sharpness to Liu Shiyuan’s art that is reminiscent of scenes found inside a science lab: clear-cut lines, strong contrasts and a flat aesthetic. For instance, Liu’s installation *We Were Never Alone Never Bored* (2014) consists of only two red- and blue-ombré inkjet prints, bent to form curved shelves on which an apple and a pear are respectively placed. While the composition is logically nonsensical, it holds a silent and almost textbook-like authority, with its tantalizing, polished look—though it leaves the viewer uncertain of what it says, if anything. Liu consistently plays with notions of absurdity in both our acceptance of how we define art and the subjectivity of what art is.

Currently based between Beijing and Copenhagen, Liu received her undergraduate degree in new media at Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts and went on to acquire her MFA degree in photography from New York’s School of Visual Arts. Working across various mediums to create her installation pieces, the artist incorporates elements of film, theater and photography.

In her second solo exhibition at Beijing’s White Space gallery earlier this year, Liu presented *Lost in Export* (2013–15), her most ambitious project to date. Disguised as a romantic genre film—33 minutes and 43 seconds in duration—composed of a slow narration against trailing landscape shots and moody intimate portraits, the video work is the result of the artist’s exhaustive research on commonly used cinematographic devices and clichéd symbolisms. Stitching together such tropes found in popular mainstream films such as *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the artist renders a perception of a “perfect” movie. By doing so, Liu simultaneously scrutinizes the artificiality of cinematography and challenges the viewer’s preconceptions as to what “art” should look like. Perhaps it is Liu’s research-heavy methodology that imbues her work with a sense of irrefutable, scientific-esque knowledge, even when laced with satire.

ANNA LING EDWARDS