

ARTFORUM

OPENINGS: CANDICE LIN

Michael Ned Holte on Candice Lin



Candice Lin, *System for a Stain*, 2016, wood, glass jars, cochineal, poppy seeds, metal castings, water, tea, sugar, copper still, hot plate, ceramic, mortar and pestle, mud, microbial mud battery, vinyl. Installation view, Gasworks, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

A SHINY WHITE URINAL greeted visitors to Candice Lin's exhibition last year at Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research in Paris. Mounted on a tiled wall as part of "*Un corps blanc exquis*" (A Hard White Body), the functional porcelain object literalized the exhibition's title and inevitably evoked another piece of plumbing—one intended for and rejected by a fabled exhibition at New York's Grand Central Palacéone hundred years earlier—that now serves as, well, a fixture of art history and an emblem of avant-garde provocations. Quite unlike that other urinal, the significance of which was predicated on its removal from use, Lin's pissoir actually begged its viewers to relieve themselves in it. (The accompanying handheld urinal, along with graffitied instructions, rendered the opportunity gender-neutral.) Reportedly, quite a number of them did. Beyond this threshold, within the vast gallery, the fate of these liquid contributions became evident: Pipes connected the urinal to a tank where the collective pee was distilled, mixed with water from the Seine, and steeped with dried herbs before being expelled through a misting device to continually moisten an elaborate tableau made of unfired porcelain.

Lin’s work is multisensory, often emphasizing scent and taste alongside vision. Traditional art media—watercolors, ceramics—are brought into proximity with industrial systems and natural processes, from fermentation to the cultivation of fungi. To disentangle her individual works from the larger systems comprising them is increasingly difficult, and a single “object” on a checklist may feature a mind-boggling list of materials: One recent piece included cochineal (a prized red dye made from crushed insects), poppy seeds, metal castings, water, tea, sugar, a copper still, a hot plate, ceramic vessels, a mortar and pestle, mud from the Thames, and something called a “microbial mud battery.” (In such cases, the phrase *mixed media* proves comically unhelpful.) A number of her installations emphasize “interactivity” of the variety that might seem like a dare, if participation is in fact optional: For the 2017 exhibition “Lesbian Gulls, Dead Zones, Sweat and T.” at Human Resources in Los Angeles, Lin and collaborator Patrick Staff filled the gallery with a thick haze of herbal vapor intended to inhibit viewers’ testosterone. (A version of this work also appeared last year at the New Museum in the exhibition “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” with a disconcerting plume of “hormonal fog” occasionally spewing from a ceiling duct in the museum’s lobby.)



Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body* (detail), 2017, stoneware urinal, pipes, distillation system, bricks, buckets, water, urine, plants, porcelain, wood, plastic sheets, misting system. Installation view, Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Fluids, urinary or otherwise, have been vital to Lin’s recent exhibitions, including “A Hard White Body.” “I think of liquid as caretaking, as moisturizing, as keeping something supple and tender, able to bend,” Lin noted in a text accompanying the show. “Liquid that keeps something fed, growing like a plant, or in a state of wet potential: unfixed, unfired uncertainty.” Of course, liquid is also capable of staining—as Lin has demonstrated with tea and cochineal—and is associated with rot, putrefaction, and decay. The centerpiece of “A Body Reduced to Brilliant Colour,” her 2016 exhibition at Gasworks in London, was the aforementioned “mixed media” circulatory system titled *A System for a Stain*, 2016. Snaking through a network of interconnected vessels and porcelain filters, a plastic tube extended into an adjacent gallery space and dripped a ruddy fluid derived from cochineal, sugar, and tea—all historically significant colonial commodities—that pooled on the faux-marble floor, suggesting a bloody, bodily mess.

Lin’s fluids perform a “wet potential” to seep into and erode the stabilizing forces and categorical imperatives that define a colonialist imaginary, one that shamefully continues into the present.



View of "Candice Lin and Patrick Staff: Lesbian Gulls, Dead Zones, Sweat and T.," 2017, Human Resources, Los Angeles. Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

It's tempting to associate these oozy interests with a history of artists taking on abjection, a tendency best articulated by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois in "*L'informe: mode d'emploi*" (Formless: A User's Guide), their 1996 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and its titular guide, which traced the concerns of post-Minimalists (and the generation of mess-makers who followed them) back to the 1920s writings of Georges Bataille. Lin might, in fact, embrace Bataille's theoretical upending of categorical values and his affirmation of the erotics of waste, but her work is largely indifferent to the kind of art history Krauss and Bois propose via abjection—i.e., a relatively narrow (mostly white, male, Euro-American) canon that finds a new way to situate Jackson Pollock at the center of the narrative. Rather, she sees other, deeper cultural stakes that concern a range of fields beyond, or in addition to, art history.

At Bétonsalon, a flowchart worthy of a mad scientist connected seemingly disparate subjects—among them eighteenth-century botanist Jeanne Baret, who painfully disguised herself as a male valet to join Louis Antoine de Bougainville's colonizing expeditions and was the first woman known to circumnavigate the earth, and James Baldwin, the queer American expatriate in Paris, whose description of a bedroom in the 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* inspired Lin's cluttered scene carved from porcelain: "Life in that room," wrote Baldwin, "seemed to be occurring underwater." In Lin's rendition, books, cups, fruit, articles of clothing, and a busted violin are scattered around a baroquely unmade bed. Loosely veiled with plastic sheeting and intermittently misted, the scene gradually cracked, sprouting patches of green moss and clusters of orange mushrooms.



Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body* (details), 2017, stoneware urinal, pipes, distillation system, bricks, buckets, water, urine, plants, porcelain, wood, plastic sheets, misting system. Installation view, Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Porcelain became a European obsession after Marco Polo encountered it in China in the thirteenth century; Western artists and alchemists toiled for several hundred years to replicate the “exotic” material—so-called bone china derives from these failed efforts. “There must be some kinship, I feel, between the first secret of white porcelain, and the promise of fulfilled desire, a kind of Arcadia,” waxes Edmund de Waal, author of *The White Road: Journey into an Obsession* (2015), one of the many sources that Lin mines. Long valued for its “purity,” porcelain is often described in anthropomorphic and even racial language, as is demonstrated by an array of historical documents presented by the artist.

Lin’s videos, much like her installations, are not aiming for resolution of historical narratives so much as for an unfixing of their linear certainty.

This vast collection of texts and images brought together the history of porcelain with Baret and Baldwin (whose papers were acquired by the Schomburg Center of Research in Black Culture, Harlem, in 2017), along with race and gender theory (among a constellation of topics), to intermingle with Lin’s own watercolors and porcelain vessels. All were arranged on pedestals made of off-the-shelf bricks and cinder blocks that lined the gallery, functioning as makeshift vitrines or reliquaries. Together, these far-flung artifacts of structural violence positioned the exhibition as a research project in progress—expansive and decidedly critical in terms of intent, though not necessarily rigorous in a scientific sense. In fact, there is sometimes a conspiratorial whiff to the associative connections Lin is willing to make—the two historical figures brought together in “A Hard White Body” shared the initials “J. B.”—but her larger enterprise is an unflinching analysis of a colonialist past in which cruelty and desire are imbricated and

imposed on specific bodies. Against such a backdrop, her fluids perform a “wet potential” to seep into and erode the stabilizing forces and categorical imperatives that define a colonialist imaginary, one that shamefully continues into the present.



Candice Lin, *The Wake, Under Construction* (detail), 2017, bricks, porcelain, wood, cardboard, books, photographs, paper, plants, alcohol. Installation view, Bétonsalon Center for Art and Research, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Lin has confessed that she embraces the field of anthropology as a kind of science fiction, and her drawings and exhibition tactics often mimic strategies familiar to the display and dissemination of the “natural” sciences. Historically, these fields have been driven by a reductive logic and plagued by what historian Robert N. Proctor has called “agnotology,” a structural ignorance that involves marginalizing or eliminating information to maintain a dominant narrative. (The designation of unflattering facts as “fake news” offers an all-too-topical example.) There are several instances in *The Beloved*, 2017, a video essay projected on the plastic shroud surrounding the dank clay bedroom scene at Bétonsalon, in which Lin’s face and phone camera are reflected in the vitrines of a natural history museum; in one case, we see her face morphing into a Neanderthal’s in an interactive display. These images suggest Lin is not only reflected by this history, but also repelled from it, as much as it lies at the heart of her inquiry.



View of “Candice Lin: A Hard White Body, a Porous Slip,” 2018, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman.

In *The Beloved*, Baldwin and Baret are both presented as misfits living at odds with predetermined gender or racial roles and forced to suffer verbal and physical indignities. In an earlier, generative video, *Holograms*, 2010, Lin proposes the “impossible subject” as a response to the mathematical model of an “impossible object.” A delirious mash-up of essay and fiction, *Holograms* is made up of found footage mixed with the artist’s own eye-popping and polymorphically perverse stop-motion animation to consider a variety of impossible subjects, including foreigners (represented by an exoticized, turban-wearing character in F. W. Murnau’s *Faust* [1926]) and “ideal women” (Brigitte Bardot scrutinized by the camera in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Contempt* [1963]). *Holograms* also includes fragments of post-apocalyptic sci-fi films such as Boris Sagal’s *The Omega Man* (1971) and George Pal’s 1960 adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), along with the Wayans Brothers’ racial comedy *White Chicks* (2004) and Sun Ra’s *Space Is the Place* (1974). Lin’s videos, much like her installations, are not aiming for resolution of historical narratives so much as for an unfixing of their linear certainty. Leaky circulatory systems running on precious cargo and/or bodily waste act as useful models for imagining such fluid results.



Candice Lin, *Holograms*, 2010, video, color, sound, 19 minutes 19 seconds.

“A Hard White Body” itself remains unfixed. Lin relocated and reconfigured the exhibition this spring for Portikus in Frankfurt. As part of the transition, she sliced the porcelain bedroom tableau from Paris into sections that could fit into a kiln and then fired them. The hardened white fragments, with their carved features still partially intact, were situated atop several provisional displays made of bricks, along with drawings and sculptures, found objects, and live insects. Rather than being confronted with the urinal, visitors to Portikus were invited to a hot cup of “detox” tea, its recipe based on plants studied and recorded—perhaps by Baret in valet drag—in a notebook cited by Lin. A viewer familiar with the Paris show might have consumed the drink with some suspicion, and rightly so—before brewing it, Lin collected the urine of the Portikus staff and distilled it as a base for the tea performing an amusing inversion of the previous exhibition. Did I mention that “interactivity” can be a dare?



Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body* (detail), 2017/2018, distillation system, bricks, urine, plants, porcelain, wood, cardboard, books, photographs, paper, clothing, glass jars, hot plate, kettle, pitcher, silkworms, heating wire. Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt, 2018. Photo: Helena Schlicting.



View of "Candice Lin: A Hard White Body, a Soft White Worm," 2018, Portikus, Frankfurt. Photo: Helena Schlicting



Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body* (work in progress, detail), 2017/2018, porcelain, bricks, wood, pipes, pumps, plastic sheeting, books, photographs, drawings, paper, plants, glass jars, distillation system, urine. Installation view, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman.

For this second iteration, the exhibition's title was appended with the phrase "a Soft White Worm," referring to the silkworm, significant to colonial trading and a recurring motif in Lin's work. The creature appeared in the flesh, with colonies deployed on several of the stations amid Lin's drawings, feeding on mulberry leaves. The silkworm was also an object of study for Frankfurt-born artist and naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), a third subject Lin conjoined to Baret and Baldwin. Lin's work consistently draws on the history of its site, though she is seemingly just as eager to let localized concerns flood geographic boundaries, recycling historical figures, citations, and objects in the process: Her constellations are vast, her associations always overflowing into greater complexity. A third iteration of the exhibition, retitled "A Hard White Body, a Porous Slip," which opened in September at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago, presents a true deluge of signs and associations—and surely runs the attendant risk of washing out meaning. But there is generosity in Lin's unfixing of history: Her makeshift vitrines, clotted with strange and valuable remnants of a cruel past, offer temporary landing spots, like islands amid so much wet potential.

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