

Five Contortions

Curated by EST

November 2-16, 2018

Five Contortions, curated by research collective EST, is a selection of single channel video works by artists Dana Davenport, Valery Jung Estabrook, Shu Lea Cheang, Jen Liu, and Chang-Jin Lee. *Five Contortions* is presented at the Granoff Center for the Creative Arts as complementary programming to *On Protest, Art and Activism*, on view in the Cohen Gallery through December 19.

Dana Davenport's *Learning Korean* depicts the artist learning to recite an introduction in Korean, stating her name, age, birthday and her mother and father's respective hometowns (Haenam, South Korea and Virginia, US). Each time she repeats the phrase incorrectly, a hand reaches into the frame and attaches a clothespin to her face. The action of pinning is a form of punishment and a marker of pain, guilt, and the pressure to perform in a society that rejects her blackness.

In *Beautiful Face*, Valery Jung Estabrook investigates the desire to change her body according to Korean beauty standards for the purpose of self-liberation. *Beautiful Face* juxtaposes sequences of the artist's head masked in grotesque, hand-painted hosiery with clips from Korean plastic surgery reality television and widely circulated American popular media such as YouTube videos and cartoons trading in Asian stereotypes. Jumping between these modes evinces the split consciousness of contending with a conflicted relationship to one's "own" culture while defending it in the face of American racism.

Shu Lea Cheang's *Color Schemes* uses the washing machine as a metaphor for the American "melting pot." It presents individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds "representing" their ethnicity—in one sense by being on camera, and also by acting out or speaking about ethnic divisions. Cheang creates a multi-layered discourse on racism and assimilation that condemns the former and refuses to condone the latter.

Jen Liu's *Machinist's Lament* posits a non-specific future populated by female factory workers and critiques the magical thinking underlying western industrial production. The geometric aesthetics of power and the romance of industrial-era alienation are paired with theoretical and fictional texts about alternate social economies. Liu critiques the effects of Western industrial capitalism by dissecting the mythologies that enable it.

Chang-Jin Lee's 24/7 installation (shown in this exhibition as video documentation) is comprised of electric sewing machines which continuously sew spools of multicolored thread onto unraveling rolls of toilet paper. Lee evokes a spectral laborer whose absence—or replacement—by an endlessly-toiling machine emphasizes the exhaustion and meaningless accumulation of manufacturing.

Taken together, the works in *Five Contortions* engage the East Asian¹ femme body as a site upon which visibility, labor, agency, and exploitation shift in dangerous flux. The relentless effort of combating sexual exotification and western expectations of "Asian-ness" troubles the notion of representation as liberatory, even as one struggles against American racism's negation of Asian individuality, the facelessness of the exploited laborer in global industrial capitalism, and the emptiness of superficially embracing ethnic diversity. The physicality of the body is palpable in all these works, through emphasis, modification, damage, distortion, or even omission, and these unflinching treatments force viewers to confront notions of personhood in the face of dehumanization.

EST (Eastern Standard Time) is a research collective co-founded by Brown University alumni Celine Wong Katzman '15, Son Kit '13, and Diane Zhou '14. EST questions the Western imaginary of Asia as a monolithic entity. While overly-expansive, orientalist definitions make it impossible to ascribe cultural, political, or geographical unity to Asia, EST is interested in its potential as a call to organize across a spectrum of experience. EST is based in New York, NY and Providence, RI.

¹ While Asia includes more than East Asian countries, we are responding to the American notion of "Asia" as "Yellow"—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—and the specific conditions impacting these groups.

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