

Xavier Cha

TAXTER & SPENGMANN

Over the past few years, Xavier Cha has developed a quasi-mythic reputation for her strange, nearly gauche, performances. In her exhibition "Holiday Cruise!" in 2006, for example, she appeared in several ways: lounging in an enormous cornucopia; as a deity called Polyhedra; and gyrating while wearing a full-body costume of hair braided in cornrows. Anyone expecting such lavishness in her recent exhibition would have been surprised by the chilly, detached tone, by the stark and minimal presentation and less over-the-top subjects. But most unexpectedly, she did not perform here herself, opting instead to hire a stand-in who arrived at the gallery at 4 PM, three days a week.

Installed in the first gallery were seven large photographs, each depicting a woman whose face is obscured by a beauty mask or a "peel," and who is backdropped by digitally enhanced NASA satellite images of Saturn. The subject of *Brush (Inger Hand)* (all works 2009) brought to mind that of a Bioré advertisement, while the lifeless visage behind the white mask in *Peel 2 (Rebecca Hands)* evoked more horrific terrain, particularly Georges Franju's film *Eyes Without a Face* (1960). Christopher Williams's recent photographs also came to mind. While viewing these images, whose deadened subjects and cold backgrounds were complemented by a bizarre, corporate-feeling installation—each work was tautly fixed by steel wires attached to the ceiling and to the floor—I was greeted by a short, muscular performer, toolbox and costume in hand, as he made his way into the second gallery.

I watched him prepare behind a large two-way mirror there, amid the sounds of *Applause*, a looped video of an audience at the Paris Opera, clapping for just the two of us that afternoon. While the looped ovation grew numbing, the man dutifully applied makeup to his face, brushing and stroking until he was covered in red powder, with large, white, cakelike circles around his eyes. Through the gray-tinted glass, the shadowy features of his face looked grotesque and skeletal, but on the other side, in the mirror's reflection, he seemed youthful and animated, with fine black dots on his cheeks and neon green eyelids. Cha's emphasis on the abject and voyeurism, life and death, was clever, and the attention-grabbing performance made even more apparent the exhibition's many opportunities to experience uneasy pleasure. Throughout the show, Cha coolly walked the line between art and entertainment, advertising and photography, scopophilia and spectatorship, and provoked, in a manner recalling Tino Sehgal's work, questions regarding

the different social roles that artists assume, from manager to maker to performer. The clown piece also brought to mind the little-known but increasingly important performance artist Stuart Sherman, who seems to be a crucial influence on Cha's generation and who died in 2001.

At twenty-nine, Cha is well on her way to becoming a great artist, though her work at this point sometimes falls flat. For instance, *Say Something*, a box wrapped in brown paper and string and tucked ominously under a staircase, presumably refers to the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority announcements ("If you see something, say something"), but seemed slight in a show that offered several more forceful plays on disguise and concealment. Nevertheless, Cha presented some of her most compelling ideas here, and, even in her absence, her strongest performance yet.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

