

## XAVIER CHA AT MOCA CLEVELAND

By *Barbara Pollack* 02/18/16

Through May 8



Xavier Cha, *abduct* (still), 2015, color video with sound, 12 minutes, 13 seconds.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

In her performances and video works, New York artist Xavier Cha boldly uses the skill of a plastic surgeon to dissect the way the human face is represented in post-Internet society. Keenly aware that we are relentlessly exposed to faces in formats as pervasive as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, Cha investigates the impact of such a plethora of images—how it affects our psyches, our perception of ourselves and others, and leads us to wonder whether it makes us more vulnerable and self-conscious or merely hardened by the not-quite human encounters.

Here, in her most recent film, *abduct*, Cha thrusts viewers into a laboratory where post-apocalyptic humans, presumably estranged from their feelings, are made to experience a range of emotions. In a shiny white room devoid of furniture or other distractions, seven actors appear, one by one, dressed in white futuristic-looking underwear. They appear to struggle as their faces express a variety of sensations—rage, delight, grief, mania, disgust, surprise, and shock. Viewers never see the characters' examiners, although occasionally the on-set film crew creeps into view. The subjects perform as the epitome of self-consciousness, acutely ashamed of being watched as they try to maintain serenity in the face of insanity.

Cha has often taken on the issue of emotions in the age of the emoji, examining how the constant use of smiley faces and red-horned devils affects our intimate interactions. Here she offers up her own set of living emoticons, demonstrating through the actors' contortions that in real life, it is wrenching to shift quickly from one extreme to the other. The impact on viewers is strangely disturbing. Not privy to the stimuli provoking these subjects, or their reasons for experiencing mood swings, viewers find it impossible to identify with the characters' emotional states. Instead, viewers assume the role of mad scientists capable of observing and categorizing the mental gymnastics of the actors without understanding or feeling empathy.

This film, a joint project between Frieze Films and the museum, is a positive step forward for an artist who has made full use of the production quality afforded by this commission. There is a chilling beauty at play here with a soft white spotlight drenching the physically fit actors in a glossy haze. This aesthetic makes the film, which is often disturbing and confusing, all the more seductive. It pushes and pulls the audience in various directions, instilling a certain discomfort that perfectly suits the emotional instability depicted on the screen. The actors in *abduct* are hostages to their feelings, but viewers have been taken hostage by Cha's masterful direction.