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XAVIER CHA DRAMA

COURTNEY MALICK 12.13



Xavier Cha is a performance artist based in New York whose work over the past few years has veered more and more towards the directorial, setting up circumstances, scenarios and boundaries for performers that she casts to carry out her explorations of the point at which the relationship between the body and the mind enters the psychic realm. Perhaps her best-known work to date, titled *Body Drama*, occupied the ground floor gallery of the Whitney Museum last year from June to October. Within the gallery visitors encountered individual performers fashioned with a cumbersome video camera harnessed tight onto their frame by what looked like an uncomfortable back brace. With the camera pointed squarely at their face, performers proceeded to have nothing short of a total freak out, the recording of which was then played on a wall dividing the space during the following half hour before a different performer entered to continue the sequence. If it was not already clear, *Body Drama* made an unmistakable statement about Cha's practice and her ongoing investment in acting and human behavior, and all that goes along with it as it is received in a public and covetous space. Her new solo, untitled exhibition at 47 Canal, which consists of four corresponding videos featuring an unusual

soundscape by Jonathan Coward, is certainly much quieter, yet it continues to take what is inherently inner and project it outward onto an audience.

How did you start thinking about this new work? Did it start out as just one video?

Xavier Cha The video began as an offshoot of *Hourglass* (2010), where the time and space that the people in the video are experiencing is accessible only through the mental projection of the viewer. With this project I wanted to take the conversion of filmic space into mental space a step further by making the hollowness of the subjects palpable—taking an out of body, transcendental experience and giving it form. Basically, creating a tangible environment through emptying out ego, objectifying nothingness. To me, it is sculptural. I conceived the piece as a four channel video installation. I wanted it to be spatial, and felt throughout the room. The sound is also spatial—each channel has a unique soundtrack that integrates with the others.

When I was looking at these new videos I became very focused on the performer's eyes and eye movements, which are also central in *Hourglass*. It seems like many of them are almost never blinking while on camera. It gives them a transfixed gaze that they are then projecting onto the viewer, and the sound, as in *Hourglass*, really enhances that feeling. Was this element of the building up of time and the accumulation of this somewhat abstract sensation (both for the performers as well as viewers) something intentional?

XC Yes, I was hoping to engulf the viewer in the unsettling, hollowing experience of the people on screen. It was interesting how their faces seem to melt, distort or become completely void of their usual animism throughout the experience. They seemed to lose their "personalities." I want the viewers to lose a sense of their usual grounding as well, to become absorbed in the vacancy.

I see. Do you feel that this show also relates at all to *Body Drama* (2011) or any of your other more recent work? To me there seems to be some kind of connection that is loosely based on a relationship between a performer or subject and the camera, and that that relationship somehow gets reflected onto the viewer who could potentially take on either of those stances (i.e. that of a subject or that of a recording device of some kind).

XC I guess in a way it also relates to *Body Drama* in that the works in this show create a high pressure vacuum within the gallery through the medium of the body (a conductor for the craft of acting in *Body Drama*, for the delicate constitution and deconstruction of subjectivity in the new work) and the incantation of projection.

Do you feel that the body as a medium, even if the body is not necessarily physically present, can have such an effect on the gallery space as to turn it into a high-pressure vacuum?

XC I refer to the body as medium in multiple senses—like the material use and also like a vessel or agent delivering an idea or communicating between realms (like psychic mediums). Using the body as the former (material) to act as the latter (psychic medium) opens avenues that can channel and re-arrange concepts and then project them into space in a relatable and discernable way.

Wow, that is definitely more complex than I had imagined, but I really appreciate the idea that in your work the body can take on two different roles, the work itself somehow representing their reconciliation or integration into one another. On a different note, I am also curious to hear from you what the press release (which mostly consists of a back and forth e-mail conversation between you

and the gallery) is meant to convey?

XC The email correspondence with the gallery began with Margaret Lee after I sent her a short essay that I wrote for a grant application recently. I thought it would give some background on the ideas running through my work. Her initial question about "technology" stemmed from something in my statement about the deconstruction and formalization of subjectivity, often through deferred access and alternate perspectives default to the presence of a camera. I was pleased with her thoughtfulness and felt the correspondence gave a lot of information about the emotional investment behind the work in the show. Usually I feel press releases are stale and written in formulaic circular speak around the work that actually says nothing.

You have done a number of performance projects in which you take on a directorial role and leave the actual performing to others. Tell me about that shift in your practice. How has your working process of casting and giving directions to your performers evolved over the past few years?

XC I removed myself from my performances because I wanted to speak to something broader than the unavoidable personal narrative attached to the artist as performer (gender, race, cultural identification, etc.). Moving on to cast and direct other specialized performers is an interest in formalizing or abstracting their specified mode of cultural production as re-appropriated materials in the work. I try to strip away any extraneous signification, popular or trend driven preconceptions and create a unique and transcendent experience through the re-contextualization of the forms.

I believe the process of casting and directing performers has become much more focused and rigorous over the past few years. Especially with my recent interest in the craft of acting as a profoundly spatial practice—I have a clearer idea going into performances of the object-like quality of acting—how it seems to occupy and form space. With this understanding I have an easier time envisioning the psychic qualities of space I want the performers to manipulate. I have been lucky to work with extremely talented performers who have given so much.

Had you studied or explored acting earlier on in school or in your practice, and are there certain kinds of performers that you are looking for?

XC Acting is extremely peculiar and thinking about it too hard actually gives me the chills. It's a freaky and mysterious talent when done well. Yes, I cast performers very specifically for each piece. I try to work with people who are exceptional in their field, however esoteric or dismissed. To cast the actors for *Body Drama* the Whitney posted casting calls. I reviewed hundreds of head shots, held two full days of auditions and another day of callbacks before selecting the final cast. The actors were all experienced stage or film actors. The process was the same for *Fruit Machine* (2012)—casting call, narrowing down of submissions and two days of auditions. I usually have a pretty clear idea of what I am looking for in the performers—again as the primary medium.

The people filmed in the current four-channel installation at 47 Canal are not actors, but people selected and cast with the help of Jonathan Coward and the guidance of Twig Harper. What they are experiencing is a real transcendental experience and not a performance. I was hoping to overwhelm the space and the viewer with their subjective vacancy.

Were the same sounds playing when for the performers when they were being videotaped?

XC No, they were filmed in silence, but I feel the soundtrack very closely captures and conveys each internal experience.

Do you have any future plans for this work? Can you see it making sense within a larger group show, for example, or do you feel that it functions best on its own as it is now being shown?

XC The design and editing of the piece and soundtrack were tailored with 47 Canal in mind, but I could see the installation working in a larger show, as long as the videos occupy a separate room. I think occupying a small room is important to the way the piece is experienced and the way that the psychic energy envelops the viewer.

Do you have any other upcoming shows?

XC I have a solo show in February at Aspect Ratio gallery in Chicago, which is a video focused space. I am also working on a large-scale multi-media dance piece.

Xavier Cha's untitled show is on view now at 47 Canal, New York.