

REVIEWS

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Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho

NEW YORK

at 47 Canal

by [Geoffrey Mak](#)



Launched in 2003, Taobao has become China's leading e-commerce platform. It has allowed significant numbers of people to start their own successful businesses—whether selling goods on the website or developing services that cater to online retailers—and is even credited with providing certain rural populations the means through which they have brought themselves out of poverty. In 2017, artists Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho traveled to China, where, in the city of Yiwu, they visited a family-run photo studio that produces marketing photos for products sold online. Comprising a documentary video and various sculptures (all 2018), the duo's exhibition at Chinatown gallery 47 Canal took as its departure point the photo shoot they attended there.

The video, *Mother Holding Taobao Child*, features footage of the shoot, which was for various kids' products—bunk beds, backpacks, toy trucks. As the child models get distracted, their parents instruct them to pose more convincingly. ("You're not concentrating," one mother tells her two-year-old son.) In a statement accompanying the show, the artists, making reference to cybernetic theorist Gregory Bateson, describe how parents' communicative signals relaying professional

and familial obligations can sometimes create a double bind for the children, in which satisfying one type of obligation risks failing to meet the other.

Uneasy relationships between parents and children are further explored in the sculptures. The largest work in the show, *Mother-Child Bed (Space is the mother)*, consists of a type of wooden bunk bed featured in the video—a model that has been especially popular on Taobao and that allows mothers to sleep on the lower level with their children above them. On the upper railing of Lien and Camacho's sculpture, a clip-on pair of plastic eyes conceals nanny cams. Footage from those cameras is projected onto the bottom bunk, displaying views of the sculpture and suggesting an adaptation of omnipresent surveillance to the home life of children. Lying on the bottom bunk are rice-paper drawings Lien and Camacho made of smiling mothers—the human face of this disciplinary apparatus.

Rice-paper drawings also appear in three sculptures titled *Orphaned*, where they are affixed to the exteriors of the sort of staircases found on the bunk beds and are illuminated by lights within the wooden structures. Along each staircase is a portrait of one of the children from the photoshoot. The image is segmented along the steps, so that the child appears whole when viewed head-on, but fragmented when considered from an angle. Installed on the opposite ends of the staircases are drawings of sculptures: one by Lien and Camacho and the others by Anicka Yi or Amy Yao, both of whom also show at 47 Canal. The sculptures are portrayed as analogues for the children. Indeed, they belong to a system, 47 Canal, that operates as both a business and a familial structure, that has made significant efforts to involve Asian American artists in a kin-type network.

How, the artists seemed to ask throughout the show, do circuits of international trade shape materials, practices, and people? Commodities—whether toys or artworks—lose and regain functions as they change contexts. Rather than existing as static objects, Lien and Camacho's works appear to be perpetually reconstituting themselves and recombining with one another, taking on new functions, continually adapting.



Hannah Levy, *Untitled*, 2018, nickel-plated steel, silicone, 71 × 30 × 30".

organized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York seven decades apart: “Machine Art” (1934) and “Design and the Elastic Mind” (2008). The titles say it all. Like Pollock’s *Full Fathom Five*, “Machine Art” sought transubstantiation—to redeem manufactured goods by placing them on the pedestal of modernist aesthetics. “Design and the Elastic Mind,” by contrast, attempted to stretch categories, so that design could encompass even quasi-scientific experiments such as Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr’s leather jacket grown from tissue culture. If “Machine Art” announced the hard-edged character of much twentieth-century sculpture, might “Design and the Elastic Mind” have served a similar function for the twenty-first? In Levy’s work, sculpture becomes a medium that absorbs objects, information, and influences from myriad sources, mixing them into “something rich and strange.”

—Colby Chamberlain

Enzo Camacho and Amy Lien

47 CANAL

“It’s hard to get kids to cooperate . . .,” a woman laments in Enzo Camacho and Amy Lien’s short video *Mother Holding Taobao Child* (all works 2018). “My kid is only two and a half years old.” In a photography studio located on the outskirts of the Chinese city of Yiwu, she speaks between the sounds of shutter releases and camera flashes, as her child is photographed modeling for an e-commerce website. This eastern metropolis in Zhejiang Province is home to a vast emporium of more than seventy-five thousand shops and stalls selling cheaply produced goods, most of which can be had for about a dollar. Toys such as inflatable dolphins, sand buckets, and children’s security blankets are just some of the stock that line rows of shelves for local consumption or for export to more distant destinations, such as the Chinese-owned knickknack outlets that populate the neighborhood where 47 Canal has set up shop.

These small commodities, along with a bath mat, rice noodles, ponchos, and candied winter melon, were all bundled in radiant plastic

Being” series, 2009–. Her juxtapositions of flesh-tone rubber and nickel-plated steel recall Alisa Bareboym’s conjunctions of unglazed clay and sheet metal. Like the work of Rochelle Goldberg, Levy’s work references animal by-products associated with luxury consumption (in this case, pearls; in Goldberg’s, snakeskin), and like Dora Budor’s work, recalls the props and prosthetics of director David Cronenberg’s gruesomely intelligent horror films (in particular the sinister gynecological tools of *Dead Ringers*).

What differentiates Levy is an abiding interest in design. The construction of her pearl-laden chaise longue is based on a sketch by French architect and designer Charlotte Perriand. Other works included in “Swamp Salad” pointed to the performative ergonomics of sports equipment. The flesh tones of the silicone she hangs over steel frames refer both to skin and to the prevalence in contemporary decor of pink, ivory, and other hues socially coded as “white.” Levy’s focus on design raises a larger question for recent sculpture, one that we might consider in relation to two major exhibitions

globules that rested on the top bunk of a “mother-child bed” at the entrance to the exhibition. *Mother-Child Bed (Space is the mother)* is primarily a flat-pack bunk-bed frame (complete with an endearingly scaled staircase) that was designed to shelter families in cramped living spaces during China’s one-child policy. Typically made of pine wood and often decorated with cutout shapes of stars and hearts, the product was thought up by a rural villager after he visited an IKEA store in Shanghai. The success of the beds, which he produced locally and sold on the Chinese e-commerce site Taobao, fundamentally reconfigured his small village’s industries and gained notoriety abroad shortly before the family-planning policy ended in 2015. The artists ordered the version on display from Taobao; the transformative success of this now-massive online retail platform also spurred the national growth of e-commerce entrepreneurship and dramatically reshaped trade municipalities such as Yiwu, which just a year ago became the hub of the first freight-train route connecting China to London.

Three variants of these bunk-bed frames were situated on the other side of thin partitions dividing the gallery’s central space. Each was similarly constructed from pine but consisted solely of an isolated staircase. Called *Orphans*, these tender structures were illuminated from within by small LED lamps, and rice-paper paintings hung vertically between the steps’ horizontal planes and the structures’ outer edges. Most of the paintings, which derive from Chinese ink wash technique, possessed sectional composites that show a toddler posed listlessly with a Disney *Cars* backpack. Along the back of *Orphaned (AMY-14-SC-034)* a painted rendition of a ladder bore the slogan WE’RE GOING TO PUT OUR HEART AND SOUL IN THIS. This ladder resembled an earlier, sculptural body of work by the artist Amy Yao, who is also represented by 47 Canal and whose practice and material approach, one could argue, assume generational influence over the younger Camacho and Lien. In comparison to the full bed frame across the gallery, this suite of works is orphaned, like its name. But as isolated vertical structures, the stairs also foreground a symbol associated with prosperity and social achievement.

The toddler, with his *Cars* backpack, appeared first in the duo’s short video, as he is one of the models at the photography studio. Unlike the serene sculptural compositions bestrewn throughout the gallery, this seven-and-a-half-minute film doused the space with the sounds of exasperated children, as their hapless parents beg for their compliance. At times, the camera cuts to one of the nearby commercial emporiums, fully stocked with toys and small goods in a dizzying range of lurid colors. The lens darts from one shiny object to another, as if shot through the eyes of a bumbling child immersed in the measureless offerings of consumer capitalism. Back in the photography studio, the children pose with these goods in hand, but the circumstances designate the articles not for play. Such is the intrigue of the footage: Bathed in the harsh studio light, these commodities appear disengaged from both their exchange value and their practical use. It’s a fleeting interval, one as brief as a hampered child’s temporary acquiescence.

—Nicolas Linnert

Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, *Orphaned (AMY-14-SC-081)*, 2018, ink on rice paper, wood, LEDs, clip-mounted light, 65 × 47 ¼ × 19 ¼". From the three-part suite *Orphans*, 2018.

