

Envoy of the Unspoken



Portrait of EUGENIA LIM. Photo by Bryony Jackson. Courtesy the artist.

EUGENIA
LIM



EUGENIA LIM, *The Australian Ugliness*, 2018, still from three-channel video installation with six-channel audio; 33 min 58 sec, looped. Photo by Tom Ross. Courtesy the artist.

BY SOO-MIN SHIM

Eugenia Lim was rifling through her personal archives when she chanced upon a photo of her parents from 1980. That year, Ron Robertson-Swann's metal sculpture *Vault* had been unveiled in Melbourne's City Square. Canary yellow and angular, it was incongruous with the surrounding architecture. The sculpture was dubbed by Melbourne city councillor Don Osborne as the "Yellow Peril," echoing xenophobic attitudes toward East Asian immigrants stemming from the White Australia policy, which was only completely abolished in 1973. Lim's parents had arrived in Australia from Singapore in 1979. In Lim's photograph, they stand in front of the sculpture, the "yellow peril" posed proudly in front of the Yellow Peril. This photograph would become the catalyst for Lim's long-running series *The Ambassador* (2015–).

The first part of the project, the video *Yellow Peril* (2015), looks back to the wave of 19th-century Chinese immigration during Australia's Gold Rush. Shot in Sovereign Hill, a theme park that emulates 1850s Ballarat, the video portrays Lim as a time-traveling Chinese envoy in a gold Mao suit, panning for gold and shoveling dirt among modern-day tourists. The anachronistic costume makes Lim a strange spectacle, mimicking immigrants' feelings of being out of place, while the kitschy setting points to the constructed nature of historical narratives, which are prone to whitewashing and romanticism.

The work is theatrical, involving elaborate costumes and sets. Indeed, Lim's studio at Gertrude Contemporary, in North Melbourne, is reminiscent of a theater's backstage, with props scattered everywhere. Lim's interest in crafting stories and settings reflects her studies in creative writing and film at the Victoria College of the Arts in 2000–02, followed by a bachelor's degree in media arts at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. It was during these formative years that Lim "cut [her] teeth working with weird, temporal, experimental stuff that didn't fit in the white cube." Lim took to performing on camera during trips to New York in 2005 while she was an exchange student at the Rhode Island School of Design, a few hours away. "With no family or roots in New York, no one knew me. I realized I was being taken at face value and started thinking about how much you can use that as a tool in performance and screen culture. You can play to the idea that people are reading you in a certain way and subvert that."

By embodying different personas, Lim manipulates representation. For her first

major solo show, "Australian Landscapes," presented in 2010 at Kings Artist-Run, Melbourne, Lim reworked Peter Weir's 1975 canonical film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, about the disappearance of several schoolgirls in 1900s Victoria. Lim is an Asian "Miranda" (the name of a missing girl) in her series of landscape photographs evoking the film's iconic tableaux. With Lim in this role, Miranda's disappearance symbolizes the erasure of Asian-Australian histories. Additionally, wearing Miranda's Victorian dress and wig, Lim took a series of self-portraits around the modern housing development of Caroline Springs. These scenes capture the shift in the Australian landscape from the fabled "bush" to urban sprawl, further dispelling dated conceptions of "Australian-ness." In our conversation, Lim emphasized the historical element of her practice: "I am not interested in making revolutionary work. There has always been a precedent or historical figure that I look back to and make evident. But I also want to show how I bring a different condition and time to the work."

Lim's subsequent explorations of *hikikomori*, a Japanese term for young social recluses, marked a change in setting from the Australian outdoors to closed-off interiors. In *Stay Home Sakoku: The Hikikomori Project* (2012), Lim confined herself for a week to a sparsely furnished room at Melbourne's West Space Gallery. During the performance, Lim did not see anyone, receiving visitors' donations of food through a tiny slot in the door. Instead, Lim connected with strangers via her "hiki portal," a website with an online chat room and stills from 24/7 webcam surveillance of her dwelling. Lim's durational performance captures the paradox of public invisibility against digital hypervisibility. In hindsight, Lim acknowledged that her earlier works were characterized by "an element of discomfort . . . of putting myself under duress. These days I'm more interested in scale and collaboration."

Lim recently returned to investigating marginalized figures in her home country. *The Australian Ugliness* (2018) is a bright yellow pavilion modeled after the Robin Boyd-designed Neptune's Fishbowl restaurant, which opened in South Yarra in 1970. Lim's work was named after the late Australian architect's 1960 book, in which he considers the country's obsession with kitsch architectural features as a symptom of the wider sociopolitical masking of Australia's fraught racial history. Lim suggests the ongoing relevance of Boyd's sentiments as she questions the

inhabitation of Australian architecture in her three-channel video, displayed inside the yellow structure. Nonwhite, queer, and older performers are shown posing and moving in more than 30 iconic sites, from the Sydney Opera House to Melbourne's *Vault*, symbolically reclaiming these public spaces. Lim herself appears as the gold-suited Ambassador in the video, but rather than acting as a function of East Asian-Australian relations as in *Yellow Peril*, the character becomes an emblem of Otherness among the other bodies of *Australian Ugliness*. Lim elaborated: "The suit is a cipher. What the persona represents in different works can shift and change."

The artist's fascination with the invisible and disenfranchised extends to issues of economic exploitation. Lim's latest video installation, *On Demand* (2019), examines the "common ground between [Lim's] experience as an independent artist, which is highly self-exploitative work consisting of free labor, nebulous and un-unionized, and a gig worker who is thinking about fair conditions but might have no experience of art." For this project, Lim interviewed five freelance workers, including bike couriers, artists, and writers. These interviews form the soundtrack of the video, which depicts the interviewees and Lim herself clad in identical blue boiler suits, performing ritualistic movements in tandem and eventually forming a human pyramid. Viewers are implicated in the precarity of part-time labor as the video only plays when they pedal on bikes installed in front of the screen.

Through exploring diverse standpoints in her practice, Lim hopes to create "vehicles for new and different audiences to dialogue with each other and with me." Her Melbourne-based organizational projects are guided by the same impulse. In 2012, she co-founded the Channels Festival, an international biennial for video art that this year was themed around instability, alterity, and connectivity. Lim is also co-director of the experimental art collective Aphids, which staged a participatory performance in May titled *Questions For Problems* (2019) at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, in which she and her colleagues fostered conversations on any dilemmas visitors raised. These projects attest to Lim's commitment to seeking connections between disparate communities. Lim is a shapeshifter, and as she engages with different histories and realities through embodiment and discourse, she reveals and challenges the invisible power structures and inequities that surround us.