

STEPHANIE MEI  
HUANG

CURATED BY  
ALLISON C SMITH

黄丹妮

(自画像  
作為)

SELF-  
PORTRAITS  
AS

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### SUPPORT FROM

Hauser & Wirth,  
Los Angeles

The California Institute  
of the Arts,  
School of Art and  
School of Critical Studies

MAK Center for Art  
and Architecture at the  
Schindler House

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*A (very brief and condensed) critical reflection on my relationship with Stephanie Mei Huang, their art making practice, and our collaborative work culminating in my residency period at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles.*

**CURATOR'S  
NOTE**

**ALLISON C  
SMITH**

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**Allison C  
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**June 26, 2021**

## Introduction

### **VIOLENCE & RUPTURE IN THE SOUTH-WEST**

In the spring of 2020, I asked stephanie mei huang to collaborate on a proposal to the Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, Book & Printed Matter Lab residency offered to Critical Studies students at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) serving as a workshop space for developing and continuing MA/MFA thesis work. huang and I first met that previous fall of 2019 in an Aesthetic Theory course while still students at CalArts. huang presented on a few of their current and in-progress works: a painting, *seven self-portraits as a cowboy* (2019), and a video work, *inauguration* (2020), alongside some film they shot on a go-pro attached to their neck.<sup>1</sup> This was my introduction to Stirrup Steph, the youngest and first woman to be inaugurated into the Cowboy Artists of America (CAA), a brotherhood dedicated to conserving the culture and history of the old West. Stirrup Steph made their first appearance attending the 2019 CAA 54th annual sale

**ALLISON C  
SMITH**

**1**  
This footage is now exhibited partially in (*self-portraits as neither donkey nor horse* within the film *e-lope* (2021).

**2**  
stephanie mei huang, "Avatarism, Affect, Melancholia, and Objecthood in staged absences of a Chinese cowgirl" unpublished essay, December 13, 2019.

and exhibition in Fort Worth, Texas. In an essay huang wrote for the Aesthetic Theory course entitled "Avatarism, Affect, Melancholia, and Objecthood in *staged absences of a Chinese cowgirl*," they reflect on their double and their drag — here is where huang roped me in.

From huang: "Donning a 1950's chain-stitched two-piece rodeo suit, white leather cowboy boots, and a classic Stetson, wielding a GoPro around her neck and a VHS camera in her palm, my double, 'Stirrup Steph,' presents herself to actualize the psychological desire

to transcend the boundaries of my imposed racialized and gendered identity as well as a political tool and catalytic agent for mapping the material consequences of her presence in territories and narratives she does not belong to."<sup>2</sup>

While huang's avatar does not "belong" within this dominant narrative of the West — or the CAA — huang does, indeed, occupy these territories in their personal biography: attending undergraduate and Masters programs in southern California, and living for a period in Marfa, Texas, as the only full-time east Asian resident at the time. A history of the South-West is ruptured through huang's auto-fictitious work, where biography meets theory, and a personal narrative punctures a para-narrative. These tensions between fiction and non-fiction, seen and unseen identities, continues in important histories of Chinese migrants (ruptured again and again) in the American West. huang outlines this history: in their artist's essay "Jaws of Life" reflecting on their own

parent's experience immigrating to America in the 1980s; and in her Aesthetic Theory essay on avatarism dragging histories of late nineteenth century frontierism in the 1880s. Where “these critical facts have been written out of the existing dominant narrative of the West,”<sup>3</sup> huang re-tells these important histories of Asian-Americans spanning beyond a century — intergenerational traumas, histories, and narratives they do belong to — such as in their recent work re-contextualizing Guy Deel's mural at the Autry Museum of the American West.

In an attempt to construct a curatorial framework to huang's work in the context of my residency, I reflected on how biography meets landscape and geography — territories, histories, and (para)narratives in the larger South-West of the United States. I am drawn to approach their work within my MA thesis research regarding queer theory and new materialism in southern Californian performance studies. In my thesis I reflect on Peggy Phelan's

essay, “Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral,” in which Phelan writes on reactions and practices by (performance) artists to violent narratives intergenerationally “ruptured” throughout Los Angeles' history. Phelan describes this repeated physical “violence” (in a beating, in a shooting) as a rupturing — similar to the way Jaques Derrida defines iteration in “Signature Event Context” (1972), using the terms “force de rupture” and “riven [crever]” (where riven means to split or tear apart violently).<sup>4</sup> Phelan mainly contextualizes this locational “violence” by referencing The Watts uprising in 1965, and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising in response to Rodney King.

<sup>3</sup> huang, “Avatarism.”

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy Phelan, “Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral,” in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970 - 1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

<sup>6</sup> stephanie mei huang, “Self Armature,” Accessed June 26, 2021. <https://stephaniemei.com/self-armature>.

I add now the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests to this repeated list of events where violence and performance meet the LAPD.

From Phelan: “Taken together, the creative responses to this violence suggest the particular relationship between live art and destruction at work in the

history of performance in Los Angeles. What is most striking about this entwining is how persistently it repeats itself; it is as if each generation must confront anew the same rupture and develop a creative response to it.”<sup>5</sup>

huang's responds to this kind of iterative police violence in a 2019 16mm film in which they don a chest-plate vest and face mask both made out of unglazed squares of clay. Writing on this work entitled *self-armature iii (At the Los Angeles Police Academy rock garden above the shooting range)* (2019), huang reflects on “violence as a performative structure, rooted in the very important question of whether or not self-protection and autonomy are futile during an era of mass data surveillance and state monopoly of violence.”<sup>6</sup> This “self-arming” is also evident paired with *yellow porcelain ii*, (2019), where huang begins to construct a knight-like helmet — hinting towards the future and continued importance of armour in huang's work.

**LEFT**  
Guy Deel, *Spirit of the West*, 1988, Autry Museum of the American West

MULTICENTRICS  
& AESTHETICS

Phelan's "Violence and Rupture" expands on a multicentricity of this violence, especially towards migrants from Los Angeles's geographical neighbors: directly to the south (the border), Mexico and greater Central and South America; and to the west (across the Pacific Ocean), the Pacific Islands, Japan, China, and the greater continent of Asia. Phelan touches on how these two geographical histories are locationally and diasporically entwined within southern California's internment camps for Japanese Americans (under new names such as the Santa Anita Racetrack and Park), and now refugee and immigrant detention centers at the state's southern border — an example of how southern California aestheticism masks violent histories (Hollywood, palm trees, the highway system). Phelan outlines the pleasures, myths, and fantasies (e.g. Hollywood, Disney) of California as the "golden child" contrasted by these violent histories — where southern California aesthetics

attempt to mask these violent histories. For example pathologizing the Old West as a mythology and film genre. huang's two paintings, *requiem for my damsel* (2020), and *requiem for myself* (2021), both play into this historical fictionalizing of the Wild West by mimicking movie posters and the cover of dime-novels.

From huang: "The Old West, as mythology, political apparatus, film genre, regionalist painting trope, and beyond, is premised upon a settler colonial racialized binary between the settler and the native, and therefore, between the Anglo-American and the American Indian. Despite its critical role in developing the West, the Asian body, and more specifically, the Chinese body, is violently exploited within and erased from the cultural imaginary of the West. Though the Americas were discovered by Christopher Columbus in the hopes of discovering a direct westward route to Asia and though Chinese migrant labor contributions to the Transcontinental Railroad made westward expansion

7  
huang,  
"Avatarism."

8  
Cheng, *In Other  
Los Angeleses:  
Multicentric  
Performance Art*,  
(Berkeley: University  
of California Press,  
2002), 175.

possible, these critical facts have been written out of the existing dominant narrative of the West."<sup>7</sup>

In terms of an aestheticism of these violences towards AAPI communities, the palm trees and landscaping contribute to a focus on the visual illusion which Hollywood constructs. The palm trees growing in Los Angeles are widely imported from places including south Asia (the Chinese fan palm, windmill palm, date palm), as well as Australia, greater Oceania, and the Pacific Islands (king palm, kentia palm). Palm trees, an example of multicentric aesthetics in southern California, lining the streets, are now iconographic of Los Angeles roads and motorways. Meiling Cheng's

chapter "A Hetero-locus in Process: Self-Performances at Highways" from *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* similarly points to the aesthetics of the geographic and cultural multicentricity in southern California demonstrated by the highway system, as well as at a Los Angeles performing arts space called Highways. Cheng writes on live body works by Guillermo Gómez-Peña created during their attendance to CalArts: one entitled *The Loneliness of the Immigrant* (1979), and another in which Gómez-Peña stood at a "spot at the southern edge of Interstate 5," and "screamed at the cars moving toward Mexico to save him from cultural shipwreck."<sup>8</sup> The American Automobile industry demonstrates an infrastructural importance of vehicles for individualism and isolation (reserving specific lanes for the rare carpool). For a modern cowboy, the car opposes the horse, and in this way becomes symbolic of transportation for American westward expansion, manifest destiny, and frontierism.

## Exhibition, Publication & Programming

### PARASITIC DRAG/ HOME FOR THE PANDEMIC

huang ruptures the para-narrative of her cowgirl drag series with biography/reality more directly in the spring of 2020. They explicitly reference the reality of the developing Covid-19 pandemic in the video work *how to paint a rocking horse* (2020), as well as in a letter written as a part of a diptych for the collaborative photograph series, *four self portraits as a cowboy* (2020). I submitted my initial proposal to the residency entitled “How to be a Cowgirl,” mimicking huang’s title, and planning to program and publish on themes in dragwork. The outfit which Stirrup Steph wears to the CAA 54th annual sale and exhibition begins to point to traditional approaches in drag through characterization, exaggeration, costume, and camp. “Everything I do is drag” huang tells me in one of our first meetings as artist and curator, them still in a manic state, still fresh on suicide watch. They were referring to painting, performing, ceramics, and other art practices beyond a RuPaulian concept of

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After a postponement of the residency due to the pandemic, huang and I received confirmation of the residency continuing in the wake of the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings. When I told huang about the residency’s confirmed continuation, they replied that now they have a reason not to kill themselves.

“we’re all born naked and the rest is drag” derivative of Judith Butler. Here is where I see a creative response to violence ruptured anew, confronted with alter-egoisms, and deeply rooted in a queer and feminist practice — in drag. Works such as huang’s engages with a type of camp (gems, ribbons, pacifiers: the already brokeback-mountain gay-ass nature and general “sprezzatura” or dandyism of a cowboy in full uniform and adornment: boots, chaps, spurs, hats, bolo ties, etc.) beyond a hetero-mainstream conception of drag in popular culture (i.e. queens).

Huang employs these aesthetics and queer practices of drag

to confront/control a cultural infantilization of Asian American femmes. This infantilization meets a hyper-sexualization positioned as a threat to Western nationalist identities. For example, a threat to white purity perpetuated in a Yellow Peril discourse and recently regurgitated by the pandemic (referred to by a non-incumbent president as the “Chinese virus”). This infantilization can also function as protective to white sanity when hyper-sexualization becomes a threat to heteronormativity and health—such as in the case of the Atlanta Spa Shootings where a young white man cited sexual addiction as a motive to shoot and murder six Asian women at three different massage parlors. Here again, intergenerational violence towards Asian Americans and immigrants is iterated, riven — in this case, rupturing a history of Chinese migrant labor in California and the hypersexualization of Chinese women in the late nineteenth century.

From huang: “In 1852, only seven of the 11,794 Chinese immigrants living in California were

women (Wyatt, 78). By 1870, almost 3,500 Chinese women immigrated to California, 61% of which became prostitutes (Wyatt, 78). In 1875, the Page Act barred the immigration of any woman being transported on the basis of prostitution. In 1900, only five percent of the 89,863 Chinese immigrants living in the United States were female (Wyatt, 80). The Page Act suggests that the Chinese immigrant woman posed a different sort of threat from the Chinese man: through the Western gaze's hypersexualization of the Chinese woman, she both threatened the institution of marriage and hinted at possibilities of miscegenation — a fear that was yet again affectively rooted in the potentiality of hordes of Chinese populating the United States and polluting white purity.” 10

(self portraits as) *neither donkey nor horse* seeks to formally decolonize and drag aesthetics of white purity and white walls, such as through mimicking the style of traditional nineteenth century European salons. In the exhibition, salon walls

re-contextualize a dominant narrative of the West, acting closer to a conversation between huang's many avatars and collaborators, a collection of family photos hanging on a home's wall. huang repeatedly questions and challenges an idea of “home”: in their undergraduate academic work, in their auto-theoric essay “Jaws of Life,” in the multicentricity of their biography, in letters to the artist. A children's rocking chair in the salon wall corner perpetuates this feeling of at-home-ness, as well as infantilizes any viewer/visitor who wants to sit and watch the video work, *how to paint a rocking horse* (2020), or accompanying sculpture, *neither donkey nor horse* 非驴非马 *i* (2020).

This set up of a “home” space in a gallery space at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, further exemplifies how the materiality of huang's work within the four white-walls of a gallery directly challenges and threatens traditional exhibition planning and installation based in Western hegemonic curatorial practices — while at the same time being

10  
huang,  
“Avatarism.”

asked to perpetuate these practices. Visitors to this exhibition will miss the sweet smell of foraged artemisia and hay due to institutional conservation concerns pests or parasites which huang's work may seep into an archive, destabilizing conservation of a particular history contractually and institutionally preserved (a threat Stirrup Steph similarly posed on the CAA). Rather, huang's synthetic sculpture works will include paper grass and a plastic hay bale used for country-western party decoration.

From huang: “This pollution of white purity is also evident in The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and a presupposing Yellow Peril discourse. A term that first came into popular usage in regards to Chinese bodies preceding the Exclusion Act, yellow peril was a method of political scapegoating that followed the economic recession of the early 1870's. The peril was amplified by the development of anti-immigrant discourses of bacteriological racism that assumed Chinese immigrants carried ‘Asiatic’ diseases that



‘threatened the vigor of imperial powers’ and were ‘racial poisons’ (Bashford, 219).”<sup>11</sup>

#### QUEER CRAFT & ELIXIRS FOR CARE

Within the publication, the decision to include letters to huang represents a longer history of queer communities/initimacies and theory through letter writing. When I guest lectured an undergraduate course on radical politics regarding queer drag at CalArts, I reference a letter written by Tim Stuetgen to Paul B Preciado on defining queer studies where it is not a question as to if “‘can heterosexuals be queer?’ but rather, ‘what’s queer about heterosexual practices or heterosexual modes of identification?’”<sup>12</sup> I proposed a letter format for our publication after seeing the development of politics and intimacy in non-heteronormative relationships, fresh from reading *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, and *I'm Very into You: Correspondence 1995-1996* between Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark, edited by Matias Viegner.

This queer practice of letter-writing reoccurs in huang’s work, including the diptych photograph series *four portraits as a cowboy* (2020) made in collaboration with V Haddad and Sam Richardson’s self portrait service. The portraits of huang in an all-white cowboy suit, are paired with a letter huang writes at the emergence of Covid-19 being declared a pandemic status. While on suicide watch, huang wrote and received many letters from those in their care circle, and those to whom they wanted to extend the circle towards. These letters, along with a series of long-beaded keychains (mine, anal beaded) with plastic pacifiers, outline a queer community, a network of care constructing a type of family who holds each other responsible for living.

Meeting with huang in March, after the Atlanta Spa Shootings, amidst their manic state, they still acted as an impressive host: feeding me a spicy and sweet snack spread of dates and marcona almonds. They beaded me a keychain with the words “anal” and “colon”

<sup>11</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>  
Tim Stuetgen, “Disidentification in the Center of Power: The Porn Performer and Director Belladonna as a Contrasexual Culture Producer (a Letter to Beatriz Preciado),” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, (London: Routledge, 2003).

in reference to a chapter in my MA thesis work in which I attempted to develop a queer colonospic approach to corporeal feminist performance studies. They attached a pacifier to the end of the keychain: it is very long and colorful and sparkly and noticeably gay. huang while in isolation has visibly created and networked their own queer family, community, and support system (making their friends and caretakers keychains with a word specific to the individual and all with a pacifier at the end). Both deeply gay and deeply baby. The importance of these lifelines and networks of care in queer communities created by letters and keychains, pleasure and craft, especially during a pandemic, could be comparable to that demonstrated during the AIDS crisis.

Jennifer Doyle in *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* writes on installation/durational artist Julie Tolentino’s care-work in collaborative performances with artist Ron Athey (who is infamously HIV positive). Doyle

notes that “seeing women look after Athey” in these performances “was not only a reiteration of the feminization of nursing and care but a reminder of the numbers of women impacted by AIDS, as the pandemic turned women in queer circles into caretakers and AIDS activists.”<sup>13</sup> Tolentino reflects on this subject during their time running a lesbian nightclub, Clit Club, in New York’s meatpacking district during the 1990s. “The relationships, meeting points, and links between the Clit Club and caregiving and support systems for friends with HIV and AIDS might be understood as webs of care...”<sup>14</sup> such as closing the club in the early morning and in order to take over a friend’s caretaker shift at the hospital. This shift from party and celebration to grief and melancholia within a community can be compared to the contrasts of a dragged hyper-cowboy-ism versus racial melancholia in huang’s work.

Here—in queer care—is a major overlap of my common interests in huang and Tolentino.

Developing programming to accompany the exhibition (*self-portraits as*), I proposed to huang for us to invite Tolentino to participate in a collaboration as I completed my thesis work reflecting on their life-work series *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME* (2008-ongoing). In *THE SKY*, “artists are invited to choose a work of their own to ‘endow... into/onto’” Tolentino.<sup>15</sup> Similar to *THE SKY*, rather than a performance or performative event, huang and Tolentino engage in an exchange—and endowing into/onto each other’s bodies, a dedication—rather than to corporeality but to the care of somatics through moxibustion. In an interview with Tolentino, huang writes on Tolentino’s multi-decade study and practice with Chinese herbs and Eastern bodywork “as modes for deepening her understanding of care and somatic advocacy.”<sup>16</sup> A rhizomatic structure of care is carried through the smoke of burning moxa, a mugwort, an artemisia (which huang spent this past spring foraging), on meridian points on huang’s body in a fortification of the yellow femme’s somatics.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>  
Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, Illustrated edition (Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books, 2013), 65.

<sup>14</sup>  
Julie Tolentino, Vivian A. Crockett, Tara Hart, Amira Khusro, Leeroy Kun Young Kang, and Dragon Mansion, “The Sum of All Questions: Returning to the Clit Club,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 472.

<sup>15</sup>  
Julie Tolentino, “An Unruly Archive By Each of Us Towards Each of Us...\*” in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell, (Chicago: Intellect, 2020), 276.

<sup>16</sup>  
stephanie mei huang, “A Chinese Cure,” Carla (blog), September 8, 2020, <https://contemporaryartreview.la/a-chinese-cure/>.

<sup>17</sup>  
While we initially negotiated the parameters of the moxibustion to require an enclosed space, a containment of the smoke and smell of mugwort (moved to the outdoor courtyard and gardens at the MAK Center’s Shindler House after a negotiation of the unpredictable social-distancing restrictions in effect for Covid-19), the moxibustion still maintains a type of “containment,” penetration, and permutation of the senses accompanied by live electroacoustic / binaural beats / equal-loudness contour sound works by artist Amma Ateria. From Tiong: “Like the rhizomatic *ai* 艾 working their way through the sodden earth, gradually unfurling and expanding underground, *ai* 衰 itself slowly unfolds and unravels in the open desert, on the lunar surface, in infinite space.”

<sup>18</sup>  
huang, “A Chinese Cure.”

From huang, reflecting on Tolentino:

“When I asked her about the significance of bodywork in her practice, she told me she is ‘not thinking about a point-to-point ‘healing’ or even a ‘recognizable’ hurt,’ noting her concern with the ‘way we share knowledge of oppressions and [the] attempts to create closure on our experiences.’ The hurt associated with racial melancholia is often an immeasurable throb that lacks a recognizable source, stop, start, or location. The only portals for closure that feel adequate are embodied and somatic.”<sup>18</sup>

In their letter to huang, Ling Tiong writes on a studio visit in the spring of 2020 in which, “we talked about our diasporic condition in common and the immanent impossibility of finding or returning home. The paradigmatic figure of exile in Western literature is the hero Odysseus. In the Chinese context, it is the moon goddess Chang’e 嫦娥.” This translation of exile in Western versus Eastern mythologies is also evident in a lingual erotics of translation, where “the word

*ji* 跡 also means ruins” as well as “elixirs” in Chinese medicine. Tiong continues to explain that “after consuming the elixir, Chang’e floated toward the moon, where she now remains in exile, a figure of *transcendental homelessness*.” The circumstances under which Chang’e consumes the elixir remain ambiguous, as well as the outcome — was this an act of self-preservation? Of “healing”? A rejection of “healing” “performance” “ceremony” and “stage” similar to Tolentino? With Tiong ultimately asking huang, “could the elixir be the *foul lump in your throat*?” I agree as huang describes, “perhaps one of the most wretchedly astringent things I have consumed in this lifetime is a little vial of Chinese medicine.” 19

At this point of the continued global state of the Covid-19 pandemic, travel restrictions prevent huang’s parents from visiting (*self-portraits as neither donkey nor horse*. Further in exile, isolated through

intergenerational diaspora as well as modern politics in a *transcendental homelessness*. For Lucas Biasch’s four letters to huang, I gave them an editorial note regarding one letter expressing that I did not feel it read as strongly as the others. Maybe it’s because I spent the most time adding notes, but overtime I’ve eaten my words and the letter has turned into one that stuck with me. It introduces how Biasch and huang met during a residency in Wisconsin, speaking about Los Angeles, themes of home, and their mothers. I see a similar unpacking of their relationship with their parent’s as it regards “home” in Baisch’s letter as well as huang’s writing — in their artist essay as well as an undergraduate work called NOSTOS, an essay on nostalgia accompanying a series of photographs of their grandmothers in hospice. huang in their undergraduate thesis references: “a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once (Boym, 50).” 20

19

Ibid.

20

stephanie mei huang, “Nostos: On Recollecting Loss and the Physical Manifestation of Loss,” *Scripps Senior Theses*, January 1, 2016.

ABOVE

Screenshot from music video by Rodney Crowell, performing “Even Cowgirls Get The Blues,” Sony BMG Music Entertainment (1993)

## Conclusion

### TRANS-KNIGHTHOOD

Michael Ned Holte in his letter to huang referenced “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues.” This iterative sourcework — a song, a cover, a book, a movie, about a melancholic cowgirl with a complicated relationship with automobiles — seems apt to reference in terms of huang’s work. From the 1978 song “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues” by Rodney Crowell, Holte quotes: “Lonely nights are out there on the road, Motel ceiling stares you down, There must be safer ways to pay your dues, Even cowgirls get the blues.”<sup>21</sup> I attempted to read Tom Robbins’ *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, however Robbins’ main character, Sissy, was raped constantly as a consequence of their thumb, their hitchhiking, their adventure, their quest, their freedom, their status as a modern and mobile cowgirl. There must be safer ways for cowgirls to pay their dues. Safer means not only a protection or armature against violence, but also a reclamation of violence: who is holding the gun, who is taught to shoot.<sup>22</sup>

#### 21

In a music video for Rodney Crowell’s “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues,” a woman wears a vest or brace over their chest and one shoulder, reminiscent of a soft-armour, a garment meant to hold, protect, and heal the body.

#### 22

Augie teaches huang how to shoot at gun age 21. They are armed, weaponized, with foraged artemisia, tattooed with a gun and a mace on their thighs.

Reflecting more on Crowell song-lyrics, “lonely nights out here on the road,” a state of isolation and solitude in transit, as well as a (k)night-hood, appear to be the requirements for a cowgirl. I am reminded here of Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986), a femme on a quest to become a knight who travels by horse. huang’s alter ego in this way begins to translate towards a knight, medieval, mysticized, armoured, unicorned (poly and queer coded). huang’s business cards entitled *how are you*

(after adrian piper) iii, 2021, designed in collaboration with Christina Huang, centralizes the unicorn in a way that most directly exhibits this pluralism in huang’s avatars — surrounded by swords, morning stars, chains, maces and bludgeons. These morning stars reappear in huang’s new ceramic works created for the exhibition (*self-portraits*) as neither donkey nor horse. With a barbed-ball on top of a horse-carousel-esque ribboned pole, these works also invoke an anti-phallus, dangerous dildo, a queer threat: begging to be sat on, but not without consequences.

From Michel Foucault: “It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medial space: the space of emplacement. This space of emplacement was opened up by Galileo. For the real scandal of Galileo’s work lay not so much in his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space. In such a

space the place of the Middle Ages turned out to be dissolved, as it were; a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down. In other words, starting with Galileo and the seventeenth century, extension was substituted for localization."<sup>23</sup>

I sent huang this Foucault quote towards the beginning of April 2021, after they expressed to me that their next developing avatar may be a knight — medieval. huang replied that they felt seen. At the time I was completing a creative essay for the Aesthetics & Politics' student anthology, *In/Form*, on heterotopias of quarantine — of the politics of vacation and island life as a colonialism expressed through post-nostalgia and an obsession with the post-apocalyptic concerns of “home” (or not-at-home) explored through the final frontier of space travel and biosphere experiments. Maybe this frontier is a space for another of huang's avatars? A space cowboy? Or would

spacetravel further alienate and isolate huang from home (as well as thrust them in a techno-futuristic sci-fiction horror narrative which already fetishizes the Asian femme i.e. Anne Anlin Cheng writing on the yellow woman as the original cyborg)? Their vehicle, a spaceship, would become home. While the cowboy is a transitory character, as well as the knight on a quest, the spaceman on a mission is based in a proposed futurism rather than a history, a post-nostalgia, a medieval space, a space of emplacement, an extension as substitution for localization. Again, huang in their undergraduate thesis describes a modern nostalgia in connection to home, where: “a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once” (Boym, 50).<sup>24</sup> In this way, huang's engagement with “space” and “outer space” is more medieval, based in recontextualizing history — a discovery that other planets do not revolve around the earth and space is infinite. As Foucault points to, with Gallelio's discovery, space,

**23**

Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

**24**

huang, “Nostos.”

place and home were recontextualized: “a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement.” Such as huang's diasporic and inter-generational immigrant movements, represented by the wandering cowboy, the traveling armed knight, the (land-based?) astronaut.

**ABOVE**

Moon landing corner from seven self-portraits as a cowboy, 2019

REVERSE  
COWGIRL

Preciado describes Wark's *Reverse Cowgirl* as a "polybiography" attempting to work "beyond the boundaries of patriarchy, capitalism, but also gay culture." In huang's own polybiographic to their work, specifically writing, they engage in a queer practice by decentralizing heteronormative and hegemonic histories — in this queering obscuring comes a truth, a non-fiction that negates the gaslighted and colonized past. Towards the end of *Reverse Cowgirl*, Wark includes email correspondence with Chris Kraus in 2018 giving her notes on the book. She suggests a digression from Wark's themes on sexuality towards "the things that feel implicit, under the surface of discussion of gender & sex. How things can be remembered, what fragments stick in a more

or less vanished world?" **25** Wark replied with laments about being a New Yorker (typical New Yorker attitude) and picking up their daughter from karate. This is how I see huang responding to questions on drag and avatarism, rather than a specifically gendered or sexualized performance of "drag arts" — drag becomes a method to re-remember certain worlds/identities within everyday life.

McKenzie Wark writes: "The cowboy boots survived the end of the unisex hippie look and on into a glam brightening of the gendery signs. But then came the fork in the road: punk or disco? I had to ditch the boots. They were tan. And too hard to walk in after too many drinks," **26** Maybe for huang's new

**25**  
McKenzie Wark,  
*Reverse Cowgirl*  
(Los Angeles:  
Semiotext(e),  
2020), 153.

**26**  
Wark, *Reverse  
Cowgirl*, 20.

**27**  
Wark, *Reverse  
Cowgirl*, 169.

medieval work they need to switch out Stirrup Steph's white boots for black studded boots. In unrealized programming, huang wanted to destroy a car with a morningstar as an expression of anger and rage against repeated ruptured violences against Asian American femmes (specifically in response to the Atlanta Spa Shootings and personal automotive traumas). In dreaming about this possible programming, huang showed me a music video of their outfit inspiration for the event: Puzzle, Foghorn (2020) in which Fletcher Shears sits on top of a car wearing an outfit of knee-length cut-off cargo

**LEFT**  
Screenshot from  
"Puzzle - Foghorn,"  
music by Fletcher  
Shears, video by  
William Sipos (2020).

shorts over bleach-washed jeans tucked into black studded cowboy boots. This is where I first recognize huang's transitory avatarisms and drag work in connection to their personal PTSDs, especially regarding automobiles. In this meeting is where huang tells me, "everything I do is drag."

From Wark: "Reverse cowgirl: It's what I like and — if you put a six-shooter to my head to make me decide — who I will be. What I will answer to when called: reverse cowgirl. What I would even select as a gender on Facebook if it was among the fifty odd choices: reverse cowgirl. This almost-girl who bought her first western boots before she even knew who she was. Reverse cowgirl: The Spider from Venus. This New Yorker, this almost American, come like so many do from the provinces, who like to take cock in her or his or her antipodes." **27**

Wark's refusal to choose an identity is similar to huang's work in their shifting and fractured alter-egos and identities — some named, some

unnamed. Finishing installation, we wait on huang to finish a painting — a second requirement. They told me they keep blurring out and repainting their face. This isn't a surprise to me as they're amidst an identity push/pull right now: between homes about to move to New York to attend the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, between polyamory and monogamy with one of their partners. But they've also always lived on this line of the inbetween, this un-wholeness and shifting identity as represented in their biography and fracturing avatarisms. This is why I also feel drawn to an unfinished painting of theirs, a mural inserting themselves into multi-faced characters in Deel's mural at the Autry Museum. huang expressed no interest in finishing it, tired of painting their face (similar to a type of discomfort they expressed in seeing so many versions of their face in our self-portraiture exhibition).

The last time I visited their studio I also noticed they were

hiding in the corner a new possible portrait painting of another avatar, Sure Shot Steph. The background was violently colored and psychedelic, I am still not sure if the painting was an illusion and we've never spoken of it. The painting mimicked the style of *seven portraits as a cowgirl* (2019), a series of portraits of Stirrup Steph — with a central portrait and surrounding sub-stories. Again, the multiplicity in huang's faces, splitting identities, are apparent in their "self" portraiture. The exhibition title including "self-portraits" points to the necessary nature of these repeated ruptures in huang's auto-fiction. Throughout the exhibition a doubling reappears — not one work without a pairing or fracturing — representative of huang's many avatarisms, multiplicities, re-negotiated shadows, and a battling of selves. The exhibition (*self-portraits as*) *neither donkey nor horse*, while speaking to huang's various avatarisms, prioritizes the narrative of Stirrup Steph — huang's double.



**ABOVE**  
(*Untitled Work in Progress*), 2020,  
oil on canvas

**CONTRIBUTORS  
(CONTINUED)**

Lucas Baisch is a playwright and artist from San Francisco, whose work circulates within themes of systems, waste, and excess. His plays have been read and developed at The Kennedy Center, The Goodman Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, Clubbed Thumb, First Floor Theater, The Bushwick Starr, The Neo-Futurists, etc. He is a recipient of a 2020 Steinberg Playwright Award, The Kennedy Center's 2020 Latinx Playwriting Award, and the 2021 Chesley/Bumbalo Playwriting Award. He is currently a 2021-22 Jerome Fellow through the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis. Outside of writing for theatre, his artwork has been presented at Elsewhere Museum, the Electronic Literature Organization, gallery no one, and the RISD Museum. He has held residencies through ACRE, Elsewhere Museum, The Goodman Theatre, Lambda Literary, and at The Millay Colony for the Arts.

Lucas holds an MFA in Playwriting from Brown University.

Michael Ned Holte is a writer and independent curator based in Los Angeles, and a member of the faculty in the Program in Art at CalArts. He is currently organizing the exhibition "how we are in time and space: Nancy Buchanan, Marcia Hafif, Barbara T. Smith" at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, opening in 2022.

Ling Tiong is a writer and theorist based in Singapore. She received her MA in Aesthetics & Politics from the School of Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where she wrote her thesis on the figure of the cloud-in-classical Chinese *shanshui* landscape painting and contemporary video art vis-à-vis the digital cloud, environmental discourse and the emerging field of cosmotechnics. She is currently an editor of *Fine, Medium, Coarse* (2021) and is also developing a project on modernist architecture in Singapore.

Edition of 111  
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