

Stewart Uoo and Jana Euler: Outside Inside Sensibility



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whitney.org

FIXING THE VIEW

In the late 1990s, artists began to picture what is now referred to as “the cloud” in advance of its full arrival. On large canvases and in sprawling sculptural assemblages, painters and sculptors such as Julie Mehretu, Sarah Sze, and Matthew Ritchie offered dynamic amalgamations of images, lines, vectors, and materials that resembled generalized and increasingly abstract representations of weather patterns and cellular structures, architectural forms and information flows—natural, man-made, and virtual systems rendered as explosive, all-over mappings. The Whitney’s 2005 exhibition *Remote Viewing* captured some of these tendencies. One reviewer commented: “Ostensibly ‘abstract’ painters routinely impute to their visual vocabularies a second skin, alluding to the world of some other visual realm, and thus blur the distinction between abstract and representational modes. The vernaculars currently under examination . . . are those specific to our contemporary glut of data and information.”¹ Deftly executed and on an ambitious scale, the abstract representations of people-less systems were presented as progressive ecological landscapes surprisingly free of paranoia and concern for loss of privacy or individuality.

In the wake of the 2007–8 financial crisis, and in the face of complex virtual systems such as algorithmic market trading, drone warfare,

I

widespread surveillance, and person-specific consumer marketing conducted via social media, the menacing side of remote viewing has come more clearly to the fore. No longer an abstraction of hallucinatory and optically dizzying media flow, remote viewing is regarded today as a tool for targeting individuals. Not coincidentally, many of today’s emerging artists are turning to the human figure as the site of their articulations. Both Stewart Uoo and Jana Euler explore the ways in which current social, technological, and cultural forces are shaping the contemporary self. With his dystopic cyborg sculptures, Uoo identifies the human form as a porous medium to be built up and broken down simultaneously: the body is represented as a synthetic relic of identity fashioned in equal measures by commercial, technological, and trend-driven interests. The cyborg functions in Uoo’s works as an almost reassuringly familiar vehicle for rehearsing narratives of the pathological subject. In the tradition of *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *RoboCop*, *Akira*, etc., Uoo offers his own post-apocalyptic fantasy, featuring fashion as an outlet and strategic coping mechanism for present-day neuroses. Far from wreaking havoc on an unsuspecting world, Uoo’s bionic creatures, themselves visibly the casualties of some form of havoc, conjure a clique of stylishly ravaged urban females having a night out at the museum. Dressed up in tawdry dollar-store fashion items and adorned with braids of artificial hair, strands of

II

razor wire, and dangling computer cables, the figures, which were cast from the mold of a single display mannequin, are distinguishable from one another mainly by their accessorized surfaces.

Uoo’s sculptures can be perceived as icons of an accelerated “live, work, play” mentality that channels value, style, information, and desire wholly onto the body, reflecting the identity-at-a-glance mode of video game avatars, social media profiles, and fashion cycles. Conversely, the paintings and exactly installed exhibitions of Jana Euler appear to resist prevailing style. Eschewing the look of contemporary painting (digital scanner printing, appropriation, and the pervasive styles of abstraction) and new-media motifs while alluding to the system that celebrates them, the artist’s droll, sardonic works stage the human figure in strained relations to architecture, media space, and the circumstances of self-presentation. In this way, Euler candidly depicts her own enmeshment in the art world and makes specific references to its sites of production and presentation.

Euler’s large painting on view at the Whitney offers a satirical portrait, in the form of a layered visual narrative, of the Museum itself. The translucent outer layer of paint reveals a rendering of the Museum’s façade alongside a likeness of the *other* celebrated Whitney, pop star Whitney Houston. This visual double-entendre plays out in more serious ways in the painting’s interrelated layers of imagery. In the background,

III

a hazy yellow flag signals “caution,” and the two iconic faces—of the museum building and the celebrity—are superimposed on what Euler calls “two variations on the idea of a human snail.” At left, a coiling human form bends backward in an extreme yoga pose, contorting to emulate and embody the structure of the Museum. Mimicking a spiraling snail shell (its prominent, bare ass conveniently aligning with the Whitney’s large signature window), the figure rests—as does the Museum—atop a pedestal-like building, upending the usual molluscan morphology of body and shelter. The image on the right flips the stack: a nondescript spiral-shaped building faintly encases Houston’s face, while pinned beneath it, a human form arches in a catlike stretch (yoga again). Marrying the specific and the enigmatic, this bizarre allegorical scene contains a cautionary tale that addresses forms of ambition and reward in the art world. For an aspiring artist, is “success” in the guise of a Whitney retrospective all *that* similar to winning Album of the Year at the Grammy’s? And by what stroke of perversity does this barefaced comparison become the subject of a young artist’s first painting to appear in a museum show? Euler’s jumbles and overlays of humans and architecture fashion these sorts of wry, quasi-comical analogies in which the powerful social and institutional forces shaping contemporary experience are presented as baffling interactions between people and spaces.

IV

Euler has personified her work’s showcase on at least one other occasion. In her debut New York exhibition last year at Brooklyn’s Real Fine Arts, she included a text that illuminated the first painting encountered there: “The one painting shows the exhibition space from above, the floor completely filled up with a body, and several eyes forming a question mark path. . . .” The path was created in the actual gallery space by the addition of a pair of semi-see-through temporary walls—plastic wrap secured to wood frames—which Euler says marked “two important changes in the body of work, the body of this exhibition and the body of a woman.” This reiterating body was manifested in the show’s other paintings (titled *Social Expectations Overpainted*, *Omnipresent Instincts Overpainted*, and *Identity Forming Processes Overpainted*), in which caricatured evocations of the sorts of anxieties commonly experienced in the art world—and elsewhere—appeared literally under the skin of the subjects in three large-scale portraits of young women momentarily coping—eating a clam, smoking a cigarette, and in the process of having her face painted (the last-mentioned was a self-portrait). Looking at these paintings—the three psychological portraits and the figurative portrait of the exhibition—head on and through the blur of the plastic walls, and relying on text and titles for cues to meaning, spectators became engaged in a complex act of viewing. In this show, the body and the exhibition were presented as equivalents.

V

As with representations of the human body, the blank surfaces and empty spaces of art galleries are increasingly becoming short-term portals for artists’ self-presentations. Unlike the previous generation, for whom room installations and site-specific works were linked to particular fixed settings, contemporary artists treat gallery interiors as a second skin to be tailored and adorned not just, or even mainly, for first-hand appreciation, but for distant audiences eyeing exhibitions on gallery websites and contemporary art blogs. Over the past few years, such remote viewing has become so prevalent that it rivals personal encounters with art as the dominant mode for tracking the names, images, and careers of today’s emerging generation. The exhibition space has become a site to be customized and, within a highly critical network, widely circulated to produce personal and artistic identities and careers.

To proceed in this new reality, artists invent new strategies to stage themselves within their individual works and in solo and group exhibitions. For the Whitney, Uoo has created a *mise-en-scène* for a runway show, conjuring the mighty flow of fashion that sustains his “cosmo/urban friends,” as he calls his flamboyant mannequins, and museum-goers alike. The gallery has been reconfigured with billowing chiffon curtains to alter the view and white canvas floor covering to reveal the dirt left by visitors’ footsteps, thus registering the flow of traffic through the

VI

exhibition over the course of its three-month run. Afterwards, Uoo anticipates collaborating with a fashion designer to recycle the sullied fabric into a limited number of unique garments that might be worn, for example, to next year’s Museum Gala.

Like Euler’s, Uoo’s figures—at once containers, symbols, abstractions, and avatars—are set into self-mocking, therapeutically humorous narratives. Both artists delineate and typecast their own realities, fixing flows of information in images and schemas much as their predecessors did ten years ago—but in a different spirit and to much different effect.

—Jay Sanders, *curator and curator of performance*

¹ Stephen Maine, *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2005.

VII

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Jana Euler was born in 1982 in Friedberg, Germany; she lives and works in Brussels. She studied at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste—Städelschule, Frankfurt, from 2002 to 2008, and at the Glasgow School of Art in 2007. Her work has been shown in recent solo exhibitions at Galerie Neu, Berlin (2013); Cubitt, London (2012); Real Fine Arts, New York (2012); and *dépendance*, Brussels (2010). She has shown in group exhibitions at Künstlerhaus Graz, Austria (2013); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2013); MD72, Berlin (2012); Mezzanin, Vienna (2011); and Portikus, Frankfurt (2011).

Stewart Uoo was born in 1985 in Napa, California; he lives and works in New York. He received his BFA from the California College of the Arts in 2007 and studied at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste—Städelschule, Frankfurt, from 2008 to 2012. His work has been shown in the solo exhibition *Life is Juicy* at 47 Canal, New York (2012). Selected group exhibitions include *The Anti-Social Majority*, Kunsthall Oslo, Norway (2011); *Mobile Device*, Bodega, Philadelphia (2011); *179 Canal/Anyways*, White Columns, New York (2010); and *Avatar 4D*, Noma Gallery, San Francisco (2010).

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Jana Euler *Whimsey*, 2013
Oil on canvas, 75 x 118 in.
Photographer: Michael De Lausnay

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