

Frieze

Reviews /

'Deities Are Transgendered Corpses': the Transformative Power of WangShui



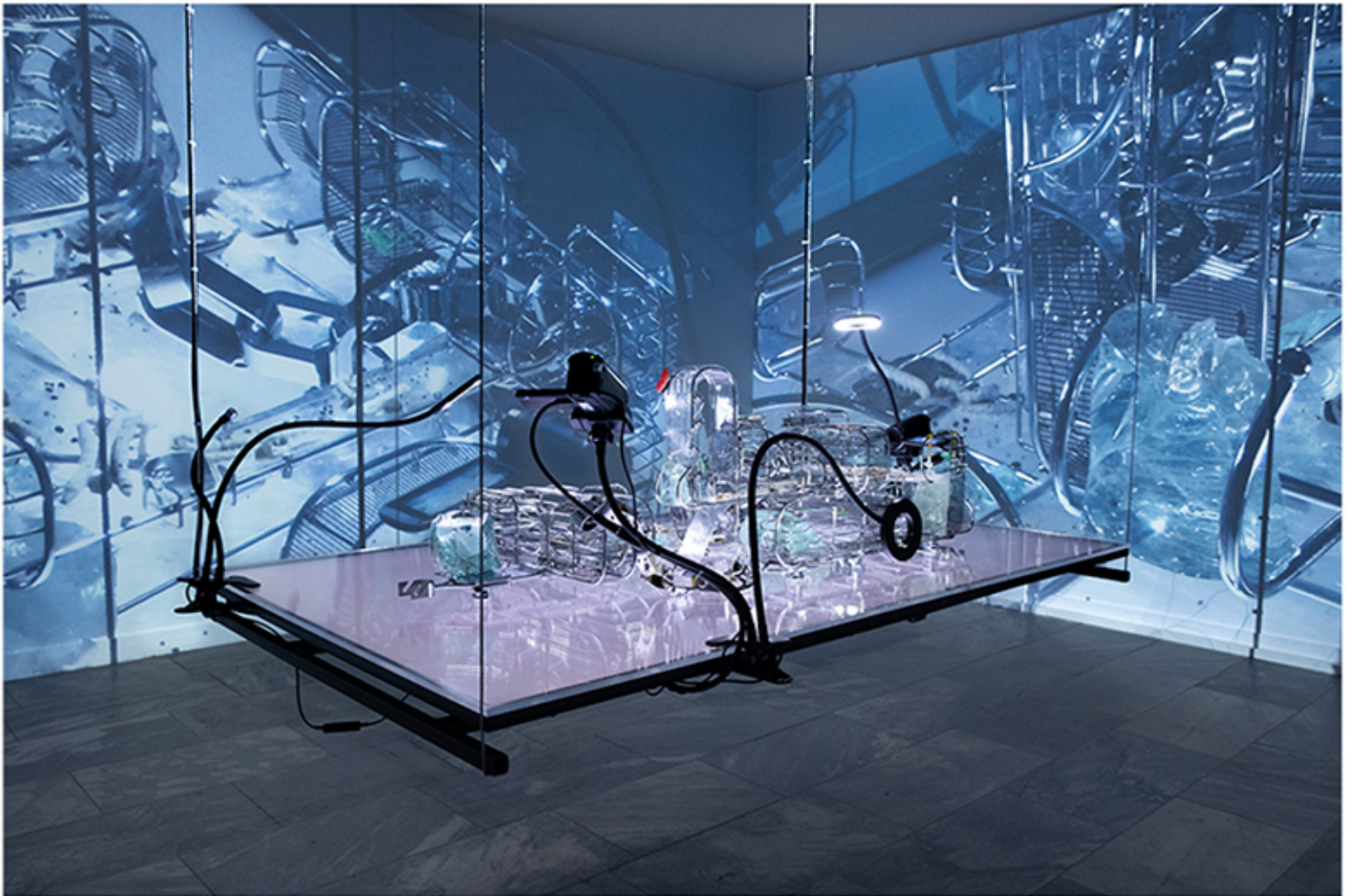
BY SKYE ARUNDHATI THOMAS

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Dragons, spirits and transformations at Julia Stoschek, Berlin



In WangShui's *Gardens of Perfect Exposure* (2018) silkworms, or *Bombyx Mori*, crawl over shiny chrome soap dishes, roof repair fabric, chunks of aquamarine glass, zirconia earrings and magnets the colour of gunmetal. This outlandish habitat has been assembled over a suspended flat-screen and is lit by softly glowing selfie ring lights (products typically attached to the front of smartphones). Handheld camcorders livestream the scene onto surrounding walls. The worms are a living metaphor: they feed, defecate and transform into moths within silk cocoons (which would otherwise be unravelled to silk thread; up to 5,000 cocoons for one pound of silk). They are a living tableau of pupating chinoiserie: exotic, ornamented and lavish shapeshifters whose little lives take on baroque proportions.



WangShui, *Gardens of Perfect Exposure*, 2018, installation view, 'Horizontal Vertigo: WangShui', 2019, Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin; photograph: Alwin Lay

WangShui is a New-York based artist studio 'born', as they put it, 'out of a desire to dematerialize a corporeal identity'. This show of four works is their first in Europe. At the exhibition's centre – it's a mix of installation, sculpture and video – is the film *From Its Mouth Came a River of High-End Residential Appliances* (2018), for which WangShui drives to the high-end Bel-Air residential complex

in Repulse Bay, Hong Kong with their cameraperson Hercules. Its six fifty-storey buildings face the South China Sea. 'That's the two of us standing together near the bottom of the frame,' WangShui says as the drone begins its sweeping movement over them. The drone then steadily moves toward the enormous, yawning holes at the centre of the towers. Each hole has been designed by the rules of Feng Shui to leave room for dragons to fly through and drink water from the sea. Hercules was reluctant to take on the job, WangShui explains: the drone will get unstable as it enters a hole, and this might compromise footage quality.

In China, Feng Shui was banned in 1949 after the founding of the People's Republic. The Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s saw practitioners beaten and suppressed. For WangShui, the holes are an 'ideological resistance' against the Chinese government, but also against Western reason. In Hong Kong, where real estate can cost up to USD \$200,000 per square foot, the holes are unprofitable, and hence, to a profit-oriented market, unreasonable. Invisible, irrational, natural and supernatural forces govern Feng Shui, and in a show that uses metaphor in precise ways, identity similarly takes on a supernatural charge.



WangShui, *Weak Pearl*, 2019, installation view, 'Horizontal Vertigo: WangShui', 2019, Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin; photograph: Alwin Lay

In Chinese mythology, dragons and humans have a deep and meaningful interspecies relationship. Emperors would customise their Shen dragons and ride them into the afterlife. WangShui imagines their own dragon, but it doesn't have a singular body. It is rather 'aggregating an infinite live image of me,' they say. The Shen shape-shifts through the show: transforming from the silkworms to their feather-tipped moths, to the drone that sweeps over Repulse bay and, in *12534* (2016), into a hydro-dripped piece of snakeskin sculpture. Four meters long and hanging from the ceiling in twisted curls, the multiple skins of the work speak to the mimetic, skin-shedding nature of the Shen.

'Deities are transgendered corpses and have names like Cry Spiral, Fish Wife [...] they eat Jade grease by Brocade river on a mountain named Feather,' WangShui paraphrases from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, or *Shan Hai Jing*, a Chinese anthology of texts on fantastical Chinese geographies and myths from the 4th century BCE. Everything evolves and morphs with a camp splendour here, always animated by ancient oral history. While identity is at the centre of WangShui's preoccupation, what is particularly striking is their subjectivity, and the manner by which they undo the representational burdens that are otherwise placed onto artists (especially queer artists and those of colour). Like the bodiless, mutating Shen, WangShui gives identity a transformative power.

'Horizontal Vertigo: WangShui' <<https://www.jsc.art/exhibitions/wangshui>> runs at *Julia Stoschek Colleciton, Berlin* until 15 December 2019.

Main image: WangShui, Gardens of Perfect Exposure, 2018, assorted chromed bath fixtures, live silkworms, audio loop, roof repair fabric, laminated hair, glass gobs, tv, selfie ring lights, plexiglas, earrings, hd camcorders, rehydrated mulberry leaves, silk, magnets, various dimensions. Courtesy: the artist

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